

## Phantom of the Past

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# Phantom of the Past

by [rikuai12](#)

## Summary

While scouting a raid target for his clan, fledgling vampire Ace finds a human, one who seems so...familiar. Going against the rules, he decides to find out the boy's secrets, and why he sparks long forgotten memories from an erased past.

## Notes

Hey everyone! Riku here with another story :) This one is one of my favorites to write and I currently have 17 (almost 18) chapters completed. Expect quick updates for a while! ENJOY!

\*Kiseru - a traditional Japanese smoking pipe

# Chapter 1

The world was bleak, full of dust and death...no greenery to be seen. Structures that had once stood tall were now rubble and blocked the way of weary travelers. Water was scarce and hoarded jealously, so much so that most avoided the "watering holes" unless there was no other way to survive.

Many gathered in small settlements underground for refuge but could never stay for long or risk earning the attention of vampires...creatures who now ruled over the desolate wastes with a heavy hand.

It was said that there used to be so many humans, the cities were bursting at the seams, but no longer...not anymore. Now, the remaining free ones traveled from ruin to ruin, avoiding patrols and trying to stay alive by any means necessary.

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Luffy coughed as the wind blew sand up into his face, somehow bypassing his scarf and getting directly into his mouth. Spitting out the dust, he adjusted his goggles and pulled the fabric tighter around his nose and mouth.

Looking forward, Luffy could see his destination. The ruined structures formed a misshapen skyline that was obscured by the swirling sand. He wasn't sure what it had been called in its prime, but the settlement there was known simply as Red Town.

'I hope they have meat...water would be good too.' Luffy thought as he trudged into the ruins, grateful for the high walls that blocked the wind. The sixteen-year old was careful as he followed the hidden markers to the entrance of Red Town, making sure to cover the stones back up with sand so the vampires couldn't follow him in.

He hadn't encountered a vampire in many years, but Luffy still knew to be careful and not lead hunting parties right to sanctuaries.

A few minutes later, Luffy arrived at the hidden door which was simply a piece of old metal with the sanctuary sigil etched subtly into the base. He knocked lightly at the door and whispered,

"Sanctuary?"

He only had to wait about twenty seconds before a rough voice answered.

"Aye, but only if ya prove yourself to be unmarked."

Suddenly, the door was cracked open and Luffy was pulled into the dark space beyond the door. He didn't resist as hands pulled off his gloves and scarf, checking his forearms and neck for marks. No human who'd been tagged by a vampire was allowed into sanctuaries.

Luffy blinked as a lantern was lit and held up to his face, illuminating the dirty visage of a man.

"What brings ya to Red Town, stranger?" The man asked with a slight accent.

"Food mostly," Luffy answered, not moving from the grip of the other two who held his arms, "I'm just passing through."

"Got any weapons on ya, kid?"

"There's a dagger on my belt and in my boot."

Luffy huffed as he was dragged into well lit chamber and thoroughly searched. Every sanctuary was like this, paranoid and skeptical of everyone who came to the gate. Once they were satisfied, his bag and daggers were returned to him, the larger of the two he placed back on his belt. Though they were called sanctuaries, they weren't true asylums.

Luffy wished he could get himself a gun or crossbow, but they were hard to come by and he couldn't shoot for crap. So, he made do with his knives, not that they would do him much good against a fully realized vampire.

"All right, you're clear." The old man said, "But I'd be careful I was you, there's some of those rebels in town that might stir up trouble. Best to stay out of it."

"Thanks for the advice." Luffy chirped with a small smile before making his way down into the heart of Red Town. Like most sanctuaries, it was a series of tunnels carved into the rubble below what used to be a city.

There were quite a few people around, bartering for supplies or purchasing them from booths. Now fully inside the settlement, Luffy removed his filthy and wrinkled scarf from his neck and stuffed it in his bag along with his goggles, all the while wondering if he could find a cot for the night.

Most of the people were older than Luffy and male. Females were highly valuable to vampires as breeders, so there were hardly any children or women seen anymore. He imagined that they didn't last long in the wastes, snatched up by vampires.

Turning the corner, Luffy was met with a crowd of men surrounding someone who was drinking booze and speaking loudly in an obnoxious voice.

"That's right! I got one \*hiccup\* one of those vamps!" The blonde slurred, "Right in the gut with a bullet, and it went down!" Everyone cheered for the man while Luffy just rolled his eyes. Even if the guy had managed to hit a vampire, it probably didn't die. The creatures were ridiculously hard to injure, let alone kill, unless you had the right equipment, which, after a quick survey of the guy, he was lacking.

Pushing his way through the crowd, Luffy trotted to one of the quieter corners of Red Town, keeping his eyes peeled for somewhere to stock up on supplies and sleep. A small stall

caught his eye, nestled in between two metal pillars, likely remnants of beams from the ruins above.

Walking up to the counter, Luffy lightly tapped the metal to let the owner know they had a customer as he looked over the dried lizard and crow meat that were on display. The quality wasn't bad, though the one on the end was on the verge of going rotten.

"W-Welcome!" An old voice called, prompting Luffy to look up. The owner was an old man with glasses and a funny hat who walked with a cane, "What can I get ya, lad? Or rather, what've you got to offer me?"

Luffy rifled through his bag and took out a rugged looking hat, making the old guy frown.

"That better not be all, brat."

"Shishishi, don't worry, I've got something better!" Luffy assured the man, pulling out some of the bendy stick things he'd found a few days before in an ancient vehicle, "These've gotta be worth something. Look, they've got markings on them!"

The old man took one of them gently and looked it over with an appraising eye.

"Well I'll be...if I'm not mistaken, these are 'rulers', or at least that's what my gramps used to call 'em. Still not exactly sure what they rule over... Anyway, I'm willing to offer five lizards, three drumsticks, and I'll even throw in a bottle of water as thanks for the nostalgia."

"What about a bed for the night?"

The old guy raised an eyebrow, obviously not pleased with the additional deal.

"That depends, what else you have to offer?"

"Um...I'm pretty good with fabric and stuff. I could mend something, or..." Luffy mumbled, wringing his hands together. He wasn't all that great at sewing, but it was something of a necessary skill when you were traveling alone in the wastes. All of his clothes he'd made himself, self-taught. The cloth didn't come cheap, so he only had one spare set of clothing.

"You got your own needle?" Luffy nodded, "All right, kid, you can stay, but only for one night!"

Luffy grinned and followed the man inside his stall, collecting his food and water from the counter and gently placing it inside his bag, wrapped up in leftover fabric.

Once inside, Luffy started at the sight of a woman lying in one of the two beds. She looked to be in her late twenties, possibly thirty...it was hard to tell with how sickly she appeared.

"Ah, my name is Woop Slap by the way, and this is Makino." He said, gesturing the woman who smiled gently at him, "She's not here, understand brat?"

"Yeah, I got it." Luffy replied firmly, watching Makino cough raggedly and collapse back into the bed. She was definitely sick, but that wasn't the main problem. If the other men in

Red Town found out there was a woman here...

Luffy was brought out of his thoughts when Woop Slap threw a garment at him.

"Mend that and I'll consider your debt paid...what was your name?"

"Monkey D. Luffy, Mister." He answered, sitting on an overturned bucket to examine the massive hole in the side of the dress. "The thread won't match, but I can fix it."

"T-Thank you," Makino whispered, "You are a very kind young man."

Luffy smiled at her and pulled out his supplies to get to work.

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That night, once he finished with the dress, Luffy slept for a few hours on the hard bed, grateful to be out of the wastes for one night. He was sure the mattress was covered in sand and dust now, courtesy of the constant layer he had on his skin.

Once Luffy heard people start to wake up outside of the stall, he rolled out of bed and was met by Woop Slap, who nodded to him.

"Morning, brat. You did a nice job on that dress for Makino...thanks."

"It was nothing." Luffy replied with a smile before turning to look at the woman wheezing on the bed, "Do you know what's wrong with her?"

"Not a clue...just that she needs medicine or something if she's gonna survive." The man sighed, "It's gotten bad enough that she intends to seek out a patrol and-"

"She'd surrender herself to the vampires!?" Luffy hissed, "Why?"

"Makino's in pain, boy." Woop Slap said firmly, "They'd be able to heal her."

"But...she'd be a slave or-or worse!"

The man simply sighed and pulled his hat down low over his eyes, not saying a word. Luffy bit his lip and sat down on the dusty bed, feeling sad for Makino. He knew that many humans couldn't stand to live in the wastes anymore and surrendered, giving up their freedom for food and shelter.

For Makino, as a woman, she'd be taken in with extra care, but that didn't change the fact that vampires saw their species as cattle, a food source...at best, a slave.

"F-Forgive me, Luffy..." Makino whispered, now awake, "I am simply too weak to survive in this world. We've tried everything, and nothing w-works."

Luffy smiled softly at her and moved to kneel beside the bed, taking the pallid hands in his calloused ones.

"Don't worry, Miss Maki, you're not gonna die, not if I have anything to say about it!" She looked at him in confusion.

"W-What do you mean?"

"Listen, there's a sanctuary not far from this one that usually carries all sorts of medicine. I'll take you there!"

Makino smiled kindly up at him, stroking his filthy cheek with a shaky hand.

"That's very kind of you, but we actually just came from there. They kicked us out once none of the medicine had any affect, and I was deemed a health risk."

"Oh..." Luffy mumbled with a huff. If she was deemed a hazard, there was no way Makino would be welcome in any sanctuary. Which meant, Woop Slap was risking his life having her in Red Town.

"We appreciate your concern, lad." Woop Slap put in, "But there's nothing you can do. I intend to take Makino out of here sometime in the next few days and-"

"No, let me." Luffy interrupted, straightening up, "I'm in better shape than you are, old man, so I'll take her out. I'm pretty strong, ya know!"

Woop Slap raised an eyebrow and turned to Makino who chuckled softly.

"Sounds like we've found ourselves a hero!" She said sweetly, making Luffy pout.

"...I'm not a hero...it's not like I wanna share my food or anything..." The two laughed, prompting a giggle from Luffy as well. Woop Slap was incredibly grateful and wouldn't stop bowing, much to his annoyance. It wasn't that big a deal, Luffy just wanted Makino to live, and if her wish was to go to a vampire citadel, then he'd help her out.

But there was no way he was getting caught, freedom was too important, no matter how dusty and harsh it was. Plus, Luffy knew how cruel vampires could be. While smiling at the others, his hand unconsciously came up to his chest to clutch at the rough fabric which hid his horrid scar, a present from the creature who'd murdered his parents and taken him away from everything he'd ever known.

Thankfully, the beast hadn't been given enough time to mark or tag him, which allowed him to travel the world freely. Strangely, it had been a different vampire who'd set him free, bringing Luffy to the conclusion that you couldn't judge a vampire at first glance.

Though, even that one saw him as nothing more than an animal. Luffy was lucky that he had been a child at the time.

They were all so engaged with each other, that none of them noticed the small, red-eyed bug that watched them from a tear in the metal ceiling.

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Ace loved technology, it was so useful! Especially for his current job of scouting out the human colony. The young vampire sat reclined against what used to be a building of some kind, about twenty meters in the air. Being a vampire had its perks, including immortality, strength, agility, and a love of jumping through the air.

He wasn't the only one, even the ever stoic Jozu would occasionally take a roundabout route through ruins if only to leap from one roof to another.

Turning his attention back to the screen in his lap, Ace adjusted the half-mask over his face and furrowed his brows in concentration as he moved the scout insect through the ruins and into the colony.

It was small enough to not attract attention to itself, but also had no microphone, which was a bummer.

"Where are you..." He whispered to himself, searching the crowds of humans for their target. A few days before, a ballsy human actually managed to shoot Haruta in the gut, successfully pissing him off.

Normally, Marco would never order a raid on a human colony unless they were clearing the area or collecting more food. Their supply of humans was pretty good right now, so they had no need to go out of their way to capture more.

But, when one of their own was hurt, it condemned the whole colony.

*"Yo, Acey, how's it going up there?"* A voice said through the piece in his ear, making Ace jump.

"Thatch, you almost made me mess up!" He hissed, hastily getting the bug back on track, "It's going fine, lots of humans...most of them well armed, though not with kairoseki...hang on." Ace moved the mechanical insect up to the rafters of the colony and scanned the crowd until its lenses landed on their target.

"Got him. He's in the center, where the tunnels merge together."

*"Good work! Make sure you check the rest of the colony just in case. As I always say, no surprises!"*

"Yeah, I know." Ace mumbled while rolling his eyes, "I don't need a babysitter." Thatch laughed in his ear.

*"Whatever you say, fledgling! I'll see you back at the citadel."* The communicator then beeped as Thatch disconnected.

Ace huffed and continued his remote reconnaissance of the colony. It was true that he was still a fledgling, having only been turned sixteen years ago, but he didn't need to be watched while out on missions, he'd long since proved himself. Maybe they were protective over him because he was turned at the tender age of twenty, or because he couldn't remember anything of his past life?



Ace wasn't sure. Frankly, he didn't feel the need to remember his time as a human. He was a vampire now with a family of his own...and that's all that matters.

Marco, his sire, tended to be something of a stick in the mud, maybe as a result of the long years he'd lived.

'Or maybe being the interim Lord is finally getting to him.' Ace mused, chuckling to himself. He didn't pay much attention to politics, but he did know that there hadn't been a Pureblood Lord at their citadel since the great Whitebeard, Marco's sire, who was still deep in hibernation and had been for centuries before Ace was turned.

Moving the bug through the colony, Ace noted the horrid conditions and sneered in disgust. Humans lived like savages!

As he came to the end of the tunnel, something caught his eye. It was a small booth pushed into a nook where an old man appeared, put some things out, and quickly returned inside, looking over his shoulder nervously.

"What are you hiding, geezer..."

Ace followed the human inside and had the bug crawl up to a small tear in the metal so he could see down into the room.

Surprisingly, there was a female in the back room, though she didn't look well. Ace immediately pressed a button on his control pad to take a few pictures to show Trafalgar, the vampire in charge of human care at the citadel. If there was a woman in the colony, he would probably insist on coming to extract her himself.

According to the doctor, they were often too rough with females and it impacted their ability to reproduce.

Zooming back out, Ace focused on the other occupant of the room, a young boy. It was surprising to find a youth as most were either born in captivity or died in the wastes. The human was short, skinny, and had raven hair that, even in the camera, looked greasy.

Unsurprising, considering the conditions most humans lived in.

Unable to listen to their conversation, Ace zoomed in on the boy's face. As he did, the human smiled widely and appeared to laugh. Narrowing his eyes, Ace focused on the youth.

'Why...does he seem familiar?' The vampire thought, 'I don't know him, but...I feel like I should.'

Snapping a few more pictures of the boy, Ace finished scouting the colony and recalled his bug. As he waited for it to return, he flipped through his pictures and stared at the pouting human, noting the small scar under his left eye.

'Could he be from my past when I was human?'

Huffing, Ace collected the bug and returned the equipment to his bag before pulling up his hood and leaping into the air, back towards the citadel...his home.

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Marco sat cross-legged on a mat in the meeting room, smoking his kiseru\* as he waited for Ace and the others from the scouting party to arrive.

The citadel was tranquil, full of green trees, rivers, bamboo, and flowers, reminiscent of his favorite human culture. Marco was especially fond of the sakura trees throughout, their blossoms falling gracefully to the grass.

Just because he was an ancient vampire living in a decimated world, didn't mean his home needed to be so ugly. With their technology, altering climate and rejuvenating the land was a simple thing, though every once and a while, stale dust would fly into their home from over the wall.

Many of the other citadels were similar with their own unique climates and atmospheres, often based off of a specific human culture. Though the species was very weak and unable to sustain itself for long periods of time, they did create many unique things that didn't deserve to be lost to time.

Their citadel, known as the Moby Dick, was entrusted to him by Whitebeard, his sire and Lord, centuries ago, just before he'd gone into hibernation. Now, Marco watched over it and its inhabitants, including the many humans held as their food source.

The humans were stabled in various buildings throughout the citadel, usually in the yard so they could get some sun in the fenced in areas they were allowed to roam. Their humans were only required to keep themselves healthy to create good blood for them to collect. Some of the stronger ones worked throughout the estate, but it was sometimes a hassle to keep track of them all.

Marco preferred they stay confined to save him the trouble.

"My Lord, am I early?" A voice called, playful in its tone. Marco puffed out another cloud of smoke before smirking up at Trafalgar.

"You're actually the only one on time, yoi. Congratulations."

The doctor wasn't wearing his normal kimono, but instead wore combat boots, a thick long-sleeved shirt and his usual spotted hat. Law was prepared to go out into the wastes if needed.

Even not in his kimono, the vampire wore all black, a color that accented the tribal tattoos that covered his entire upper body. Marco preferred the lighter colors, like his own kimono which was white with blue and yellow flowers, open wide in the front to show his pride... Pops' mark.

"How are the humans this week?" Marco asked as he tapped his kiseru on the edge of the ash tray and prepared to re-light it, "No trouble I hope, yoi."

"They are doing well." Trafalgar replied as he sat diagonal to him, "Four of the females are pregnant, and the younglings are showing to be healthy. We did have to put five adult males down though, just this morning."

"Your reasoning?"

"Two were too old to continue giving blood, and the other three refused to be tamed. They were among the ones captured during the attack on our patrol two months ago."

Marco clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Such a shame to waste food...are the other newcomers tolerating captivity better, yoi?" Trafalgar smirked.

"There's nothing like a few sessions with me to crush a rebellious spirit."

Marco snorted at that and looked up just in time to see Thatch skip through the sliding door.

"Sorry I'm late, had to stop for a snack!" He chirped before plopping down on the mat next to Marco.

"Thatch-ya, you know it's not allowed to drink directly from a human." Trafalgar chided as he poured himself a cup of tea.

"I can control myself!" The pompadoured vampire whined, "I only took a little..."

"Just be more careful, Thatch." Marco added, pinning the care-free vampire with a stare, "Humans are a dying race, we can't afford to lose them to gluttony."

As they waited for Ace to arrive, Thatch poured himself some tea and munched on a muffin, not that it did anything for him, nutrition-wise. Vampires could eat human food, but it didn't sustain them unless it was laced with blood. Still, the pleasant flavors were nice every once and a while. About thirty-minutes later, Ace arrived covered in dust and breathing hard.

"You're late, yoi." Marco chided, motioning for the fledgling to take a drink of tea.

"S-Sorry...I rushed here as fast as I could." Ace said quickly while settling himself down and taking a deep gulp of tea, "I finished scouting the colony. The target has made a little home for himself in the center room with all his followers so it shouldn't be difficult to capture him."

Marco hummed, glad the raid wouldn't require many of their resources. They would storm the colony, take the arrogant human and his cronies, and show him what happened when you crossed a vampire.

"Though...after a thorough search, there is a female in the colony." Ace added, turning to Trafalgar, "She looks terrible and I'm not sure she'll survive much longer." The fledgling handed his pad to Law who took it and looked over the pictures.

"Hmmm.... I'll need a closer look to properly diagnose, but I would like to try and save her if I can." The doctor then swiped his finger and raised an eyebrow, "Who's this, Ace-ya?"

Turning the pad around, it showed a picture of a young human boy with scruffy raven hair and big eyes.

"Just a kid who was with the woman..." Ace answered quickly, taking the pad back.

"Aww...he's cute!" Thatch cooed, looking over Ace's shoulder.

"Quit that!" The freckled vampire protested, holding the pad close to his chest. Marco couldn't help but think the young one was hiding something...something concerning the boy.

But they didn't have time for that, not if they wanted to add another healthy female to their stocks.

"Enough, both of you. Commence the raid as soon as possible. Thatch, you take the lead. Trafalgar, you are in charge of securing the woman and may take as many of your assistants as you like."

The three stood, bowed low to him, and quickly left the room.

Marco sighed, hoping they would return quickly and safely. Ace had come a long way since being turned but was still young and many times reckless. The fledgling had a lot to learn.

He set his kiseru down and took the letter delivered to him the day before out of his kimono (given to him in person for security purposes as some of the smarter humans were known to intercept their electronic messages), sealed with the Pureblood's sigil.

'It seems there will soon be a change in leadership here...hopefully, it will stay the way Pops envisioned.'

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Ace wasn't sure what he was doing.

He should be joining Thatch and the raid party, but here he was, in his room, consumed with thoughts of a human boy. The youth who seemed so familiar to him and filled him with a need to protect...to keep the kid close. Never before had his mind felt so overwhelmed, it almost physically hurt every time he tried to push the youth out of his thoughts.

Flashes of images pulsed through his head, of a woman...though it was too blurry to make out, and-and a man? Who were these people? Neither of them was the boy!

'I literally saw him for like a few minutes! What the hell is wrong with me!?'

Taking a deep breath, Ace made his decision. He would capture the boy and find out why, for whatever reason, he sparked these images in his mind.

'Marco won't be pleased...' Ace mused, as he packed his bag with some extra cuffs, rope, and sedative. 'Especially since I don't particularly want to share him with the clan...'

Having a personal human was strictly forbidden, not that he intended to use the kid as a blood slave. No, but he needed to curb this obsession before it got out of hand. Ace would just keep the kid locked in his room until the mystery was solved, then...well, he'd think of that when the time came.

Marco would likely punish him, but he would also forgive him. He always did.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

Here's Chapter 2! Hope ya'll enjoy :)

Luffy swiftly stuffed his things back into his bag as he prepared to take Makino out into the wastes. It wouldn't be difficult to locate a patrol; the hard part was slipping away unnoticed. Vampires were notoriously difficult to sneak past once you were within a certain range.

Thankfully, Luffy's smell was somewhat masked by layers upon layers of dust and grime that, while not particularly pleasing to others, helped keep him safe while he traveled.

"T-Thank you for doing this..." Makino whispered from the bed, already looking more relaxed, "Not many would put their lives on the line for a stranger."

"Don't worry about it!" Luffy replied with a bright grin, "I like you and the old man, so it's no problem!"

Plus, he was getting restless from being underground for almost two days now, much longer than he'd originally planned due to Makino's fluctuating health. He wouldn't take her out just to have her die before they found a patrol!

Luffy had gone out into the main tunnels briefly to pass the time but returned quickly when the self-proclaimed "vampire slayer" began to hassle him.

'That idiot provoked a vampire, likely a member of the local clan.' Luffy mused as he slipped his scarf around his neck, 'Depending on which clan, they may want-'

Suddenly, the whole cave shook violently, showering them with rocks. Luffy immediately threw himself over Makino to protect her. When the shaking stopped, screams began to fill the air.

"It's a raid!" Woop Slap hissed, pushing his way into the back room, "Vampires are already swarming the tunnels! You need to get out of here, lad!"

"Not without you!" Luffy retaliated, taking in the old man's bleeding forehead (likely from a falling rock). If he left Woop Slap behind, he would likely be killed just for being elderly. "I'll carry you and-"

"NO!" The old man refused loudly as he pushed Luffy out the door, "I'll just slow you down. Take what I promised you and go! Makino and I will be fine."

Luffy bit his lip and turned to Makino who smiled sweetly at him.

"It's all right, Luffy, everything will work out. Just go!"

Nodding shortly, the boy shot through the door and out into the tunnel, tears building in his eyes. All he could do was pray they would spare Woop Slap and treat Makino well.

He could hear the vampires coming from the western tunnels so Luffy ran east, towards one of the additional exits all sanctuaries had. Soon he was joined by other screaming people desperate to escape capture. They pushed and shoved past him, using their superior weight to bowl over his small body.

Luffy cried out in pain as he was trampled underneath the wave of terrified souls, curling in on himself to protect his head. When the stampede ended, he pushed himself up and kept going, trying to ignore the pain. Luffy grimaced at the feeling of bruised legs, hoping neither was broken.

Limping around the corner, he was met with the same crowd, rushing back the way they'd just ran. Not wanting a repeat of what just happened, Luffy squeezed his tiny figure into a space between a metal beam and the rock. It was essentially a small cave in the side of the tunnel and served his purpose for the moment: not getting trampled, again.

Taking a deep breath, Luffy sat down and shuffled himself backwards, hugging his bag tight to his chest. As he interlocked his fingers, the boy felt a strange wetness, one that he quickly identified as blood. Cursing, Luffy tugged off his scarf and held it firmly to the bleeding wound, hoping none of the vampires would take the time to follow one small scent.

'If they were coming back, then the other exits must already be blocked off.' Luffy thought as he watched the terrified people rush around outside of his little hiding place.

He physically jolted as loud, commanding voices began to shout and people were dragged out of his field of vision by gloved hands. The vampires had arrived.

Swallowing wetly, Luffy scooted as far back into the nook as he could. It curved slightly at the very back, offering him some protection if a vampire were to look inside. Plus, the opening was too small for most to get through.

Maybe he could wait it out...

---

Law marched through the colony with purpose, leading a group of four vampires trained in human care and handling. As they walked, he couldn't help but smirk as the soldiers did their job, catching all the humans efficiently and taking them outside with cuffs on their wrists.

Their target had been one of the first captured, despite using his entourage as a shield and attempting to escape. Even if he had managed to run, there was nowhere to go. Thanks to Ace's surveillance, they had all of the exits covered.

Mentally picturing the map they'd compiled of the colony's tunnel system, Law swiftly made his way to where Ace reported seeing the female.

When they arrived, Law nodded to his companions who rushed ahead of him and into the dwelling to secure any other humans who were inside. He waited only a few seconds before following his men inside, stepping over what remained of the wooden booth that had blocked the entrance.

Two of his men were securing an old male (who he recognized from Ace's pictures), while the other two surrounded the female on the bed, firmly holding her wrists to prevent her from moving too much.

"Hello there..." Law said softly as he kneeled before the woman, taking stock of her situation. She wasn't breathing well, had an unnaturally pale complexion, and was definitely malnourished. His men held the female while he checked her vitals.

As he did this, the woman bit her lip and looked down at Law's shoes.

'At least she's submissive.' Law thought as he stood up. The less their prey resisted, the easier it was on him.

"Will she be all right?" The old man in the corner asked, straining slightly against the cord holding his wrists behind his back.

"Are you her caregiver?" Law asked, turning from the woman, "Do you have knowledge of her condition?"

"I-I...well, I've been taking care of her, but I'm not sure what's wrong with her..."

Law hummed and turned back to the female, noting the frightened, familiar look she gave the older man. They didn't usually take old humans back to the citadel, but this one could be useful in keeping the woman calm and in good health.

They could always dispose of him later.

"Go get a stretcher from the truck." Law ordered one of the men watching the old human, "I need to get this one back to the citadel as soon as possible for treatment."

"Of course, Sir!"

While he waited, Law examined the woman and her current dwelling. The hovel was filthy and covered in a layer of dust, even the beds to an extent. Though, one other bed besides the female's had been cleaned...and recently.

'That's right...there was another, the boy.' Law thought, 'Did he run, I wonder?'

"Oi, Law, how's it going in here?" A voice asked, bringing him out of his thoughts. Ace pushed the curtain aside and joined them in the small room, "I see you found her."

"Yes, though there is no sign of the third occupant." Law informed him before turning to the woman, "Where is the boy who was with you?" She flinched and attempted to pull back from the edge of the mattress, to no avail.



"H-He left the sanctuary yesterday." She answered timidly, refusing to look him in the eye. Beside him, Ace snarled and grabbed the female none to gently by the chin.

"*Don't* lie to us. Where did he go!?"

"Ace-ya, that's enough." Law chided, moving to stand between them, "You're being too rough."

Ace actually *hissed* at him, eyes turning red for a moment before returning to his normal silver. It was... intriguing. Obviously, the boy had peaked the fledgling's interest.

"Don't hurt Makino!" The old man shouted, gaining Ace's attention.

"I wasn't planning to..." The freckled vampire said as he approached the male human and leaned down to meet his gaze, "But I also don't appreciate being lied to. Where's the boy? I won't ask again."

Law had to admit, the fledgling was a good interrogator when he got serious. Fear was obvious the human's eyes, and the doctor suspected Ace wouldn't even have to persuade him to get the information he wanted.

Vampires have the ability to put humans into a trance-like state. Their eyes are hypnotic and incredibly enticing when their natural vibrant red color. If paired with proper voice techniques, there were few who could resist. It was a useful talent that made controlling the weaker species simple, though it took practice to totally master.

Luckily for Ace, he had a good teacher.

"H-H-He left minutes before you got here." The old man stuttered, backing up till his back hit the rock wall.

"So, he's still here..." Ace whispered to himself before rushing back out into the tunnel.

Law snorted in amusement when the fledgling nearly collided with his subordinate who'd returned with a stretcher. Ace was a strange one...he'd have to question him about his interest in the human boy later.

"Let's get them to the truck." Law instructed, "We have a lot of prisoners to transfer, and she's our number one priority right now."

---

Ace jogged through the tunnels, surveying all the humans who'd already been caught. His human was not among them. He knew there were still stragglers but wanted to hold out hope that the boy had avoided capture so far.

If the youth was taken to the stables, it would be a lot more difficult to question him alone. And, frankly, Ace didn't want to share.

Walking down the tunnel, he sniffed, trying to detect anything or anyone out of place. Ace passed a few other vampires escorting groups of humans to the entrance, but it emptied

quickly as no more humans remained in the section.

'The exits are still blocked, so he has to be in here somewhere...'

Just as he started to become frustrated with his lack of success, the coppery smell of blood filled his lungs. It was very faint compared to the thick, permeating stench that filled the colony after their raid, but to Ace, it smelled different...unique somehow.

Following the scent around a corner, he crouched down and peered into a dark crevice, immediately locking eyes with his human. The kid was huddled in a tight ball with his back against the rock and bag held to his chest. When their eyes met, the boy's breath hitched, and he attempted to scoot even further away from him.

"There you are..." Ace whispered with a smirk, taking in the young one's huddled form. The boy was scrawny, runt like, much more so than the video portrayed. Amazingly, though he reeked of fear, the human didn't avert his gaze and even growled at him, warning the vampire to stay away.

It really wasn't intimidating and made Ace chuckle. The human was spirited.

Not moving from his position, Ace examined the crevice his human made into a hiding place. It was too narrow for him to enter as it was barely large enough for the kid to squeeze into.

*"Why don't you come out here, little one?"* Ace coaxed, willing his eyes to turn scarlet and deepening his pitch, *"I won't hurt you, I promise."*

Surprisingly, the human immediately shut his eyes and curled up with his head in his lap, hands coming up to cover his ears. A scarf covering his prey's right hand fell away, revealing a nasty cut from which crimson blood flowed down his now upright arm. Since he'd been found, there was no need to try and hide the smell.

The kid knew about their persuasion techniques, which complicated things, but didn't discourage him.

Even with hands covering his ears, Ace's voice would still reach him. Without proper earplugs or something similar, bare hands wouldn't do the job well enough.

*"Come on...it's okay...don't be afraid."*

The kid trembled from the strain of resisting, but he still didn't move towards Ace. Frowning, the vampire changed to a more authoritative tone.

*"Come out of there, now, human."*

"I won't!" The boy screeched, taking Ace by surprise, "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

Ace huffed at the human's continued resistance, but felt his interest grow. This kid was smart and definitely more resilient than most humans. And, since he'd just confirmed he could hear him...

*"Come. Here. Now."* Ace commanded, his voice low and full of power. Marco taught him that simply raising your voice doesn't make the persuasion any more effective. It's all about presence and authority.

At his words, the kid shuddered and began to crawl slowly towards him, definitely against his will, pushing the bag along with his knee. The boy's eyes were open now but focused on the ground and his movements forced.

*"That's it...come out of there."*

About halfway out of the crevice, his human whined in frustration and forced himself to stop, but a few more words from Ace and he resumed his slow trek. Just as he came within range of Ace's arm, he stopped resisting and threw himself at the vampire.

The little human swiped at him with a long knife, forcing Ace to jump back and breaking his concentration. When the kid landed on his feet, his legs buckled, bringing him to his knees. Before his target could get up and run, Ace was on him.

He pushed the boy down into the dirt, face-first, and secured him there with his knee. Ace grabbed the scuffed arms and held them tightly against the human's lower back, twisting his wrist to make him drop the knife.

"No, let me go!" The human shouted as he thrashed in Ace's hold, "Get off!"

"Easy, easy..." Ace soothed, trying to get the boy to calm down. If he was too loud, others would hear and come to investigate. "I'm not going to hurt you so-"

The kid cried out *again* and wouldn't stop moving around. Deciding to put an end to it, Ace gripped both of the boy's arms with one hand and reached into his pocket to pull out the sedation pen he'd grabbed before leaving the citadel.

Flipping up the cap, Ace jammed the pen into his captive's neck, injecting him with a powerful sedative. He didn't usually carry them around because taking humans wasn't generally part of his job description, but he made sure to bring one just in case.

Almost immediately, the boy went limp.

Taking a deep breath, Ace got off the small figure and rolled him over onto his back so he could get a better look at his prize. First of all, now that he was close to the human, he stunk! The kid smelled like he'd rolled over in manure and then jumped into a swamp or something.

His hair was greasy (as he'd seen on the video) and covered in a layer of dirt. Additionally, the boy had bruises and cuts all over his body. The one on his right hand was bleeding profusely and likely what had led Ace to him in the first place. There was definitely something wrong with the boy's legs if the shaking and weakness was anything to go by, but he didn't have time to look him over thoroughly.

Ace took some bandages out of his pack and quickly wrapped the hand, not wanting him to bleed so much that he alerted other vampires to his presence.

Moving on, he secured the boy's wrists behind him with metal cord and tied his legs together in the same way. Just to be safe, Ace gagged the human with a thick strip of cloth.

'It would be bad if he were to wake up and scream before I could get him home...' He thought while pulling out a large bag that would serve as the kid's home for the next few hours. It was unnervingly simple to pick up the tiny human and slide him into the bag.

He was so...thin. Was he eating right?

Tying the bag closed, Ace threw his bundle over his shoulder along with the kid's pack as it could hold clues to answering some of his many questions.

Hopefully the sedative would do its job and keep his captive asleep. Ace couldn't afford to get caught, not now.

---

Thatch nodded in approval as group after group of human captives was brought out of the colony. They were making good time and would probably be home before dinner.

"Sir!" A low ranked soldier shouted, "Trucks two and three are full. Should we send them back to Moby or wait?"

"Yeah, go ahead." With so many prisoners, it would take a while to process them all so the faster they got them home, the better.

Thatch trotted over to Trafalgar who was finishing securing the female in his medical vehicle.

"How's she doing, Doc?" He asked, looking over the woman who had an oxygen mask over her face and an IV in her arm.

"She'll live, just needs some antibiotics and rest." Trafalgar answered smoothly before pulling Thatch away from the vehicle and whispering, "Has Ace-ya contacted you?"

"Uh...no," Thatch replied, brow furrowing, "Is he in trouble?"

"I'm not sure yet." Law replied, looking pensively to the ruined colony, "He rushed off in pursuit of the little human boy from his pictures. I've never seen him so...obsessive."

Thatch hummed, deep in thought. There were a couple different things that could cause a vampire to become obsessed with a human. First, their blood types matched. He'd seen aged vampires go out of their way to capture a human in battle because they smelled so appetizing. Hell, Vista did that during the last ambush!

But Ace hadn't smelt the kid at all yet, so that probably wasn't why.

Second, was if they were mates. It happened sometimes where a vampire and human were fated to be together. He supposed it was possible, but unlikely considering Ace was still deeply connected to Marco, his sire. The freckled vampire was still a fledgling, theoretically incapable of having any other special bond just yet.

It could also just be a random interest or maybe the kid reminds Ace of someone, someone from his forgotten past... If that was the case, Marco would need to know.

It wouldn't be good if Ace remembered his heritage and everything that happened. All of Marco's hard work would go to waste.

Thatch huffed and tapped his earpiece to activate it.

"Ace, you there? Where are you?"

*"Yeah, I'm here,"* Ace replied, sounding slightly out of breath, *"and heading back home."* Thatch frowned at that.

"What? Why-"

*"Er...no reason, just covered in dirt and stuff, so I want to take a shower before the gathering later. The trucks are too slow."*

Ah, right. Marco had told him about that meeting yesterday...should be interesting.

"Okay, but make sure you report in when you get there. Otherwise, Izo will have my head."

*"Yeah, I'll do that."* Then the communicator shut off. Law was staring at him, obviously wanting to know what the fledgling said.

"Apparently, Ace is heading back already...to shower."

"Really?" Law hummed, "He's never done that before...would you like me to question him?"

"No," Thatch determined, "We have more important things to focus on right now. I'll mention it to Marco later, hopefully it's nothing to worry about."

---

Marco took a deep breath as he prepared to enter the throne room. It hadn't been used since Pops was Lord. Marco preferred the more casual sitting rooms where he could commune directly with his generals and subordinates, it made them feel included and not looked down upon.

Pushing the heavy doors open, the blonde vampire walked into the vast space confidently, meeting the gazes of the two young purebloods mingling on the marble steps (a remnant of Pops' original design).

"My Lords, it is an honor to welcome you to the Moby Dick, my citadel." Marco greeted while kneeling respectfully. Not one to cower before others in his own home, he looked up soon after kneeling and examined the purebloods.

First was a blonde vampire with what looked like burn scars down the left side of his face. He smiled slightly at him and bowed his head. Marco didn't know him but appreciated his respect.

To his left was a red-head, broad and intimidating. Marco knew this one, his father was a pain in pretty much everyone's ass but also one of the most influential Vampire Lords to date.

'He doesn't appear to have inherited Shanks' carefree spirit...' Marco mused as he looked into the young pureblood's eyes, evaluating.

"Thank you for your greeting, Lord Phoenix." The blonde one answered, "Have you been briefed on the details of our acquisition?"

Yes, he certainly had. The pureblood council decided his citadel needed a leader of "higher caliber" than him, despite all Marco had accomplished and how prosperous they were. Their solution was to send two young nobles, fresh out of training and barely into their second decade of life, to take over leadership of the Moby Dick.

It was something of a competition or examination to them. Their skills would be tested and if they failed, their future (and that of their family) would be bleak. Marco imagined that Shanks' son was already in good standing, but the other one seemed to be from a lower ranking family.

"I have, yoi. Though, if I may, will the two of you rule together?"

"The position of Lord has already been determined by our performance in training and current standing." The red-haired noble informed him, "I will be Lord and delegate tasks to Sabo as I see fit."

"Very well, Lord..."

"Eustass Kidd." The young noble answered, "I look forward to hearing your council, Phoenix, and making this citadel into the best it can be."

Marco bowed his head, keeping his opinions to himself. Of course he didn't want these rash, young purebloods ruining Pops' legacy, but there was nothing he could do to oppose it.

How would his subordinates respond to the change in leadership? Hopefully, with grace... yeah...that'd be nice.

## Chapter 3

It took Ace longer to get home than he expected, but somehow, he was able to sneak in over the back wall and reach his room without running into anyone. Once he got the human settled, he'd go find Izo and check in.

Ace gently laid the large bag on the rug of his room and made sure the door was bolted shut before turning all his attention to the boy. The sedative did its job and his human was still sound asleep.

The freckled vampire cradled the tiny body, still trussed up, and carried him to the bathroom. There was no way he was leaving him in his room smelling like he'd rolled around in a pile of trash.

He carefully removed the kid's restraints and gag before laying him on the fluffy bath mat so he could turn on the faucet and get the water nice and warm. As the bath filled, Ace began to remove the boy's clothing. He wrinkled his nose in disgust at the grimy and stiff fabric that stuck to the kid's skin, likely from sweat.

After a great deal of unexpected difficulty, Ace managed to remove the kid's clothing, and what he found made him frown.

His human was covered in cuts and bruises, both old and new, some still seeping blood. Ace could now see why the kid couldn't stand properly; his legs were practically one massive contusion. Gently palpating the sensitive skin, Ace determined the right leg had a fractured fibula, but the left was okay (aside from the obvious injuries).

'I'll need to thank Trafalgar for insisting I learn basic anatomy and first aid.' Ace mused, moving his eyes up to the boy's torso.

His human had a massive burn on his chest that looked old, and positively horrid.

"You've been through hell, haven't you?" Ace whispered, turning off the faucet before the bath overflowed, "Don't worry, I'll take care of you..."

He lifted the limp form into the tub, taking note of the fact that he could feel the human's ribs. The second the kid's flesh entered the bath, the water began to turn brown from the caked-on dirt and dust.

Ace washed him the best he could but ended up having to drain the tub after only a few minutes due to the sheer amount of muck coming off the kid. Changing strategies, he dug out an old plastic chair Thatch had used in a prank a few years before and put it in the tub.

Using the shower and having the kid draped over the chair worked much better as Ace was able to scrub him thoroughly without having him sit in filthy water. The vampire tried to be as gentle as he could while washing the boy's legs and careful with the open wound on his hand.

Eventually, Ace moved on to the kid's hair, a greasy mess. After *four* shampoos, he finally felt like it was clean enough and shut off the shower head.

Bundling the tiny form in a fluffy towel, Ace made sure he was dry, not wanting him to get sick. Now that he was clean, the freckled vampire ran a hand through the now soft raven locks, satisfied with his work.

Leaving the boy leaning up against the tub, Ace jogged out into his bedroom and dug around in his drawers for clothing that would fit his human. Deciding there really was no good option, Ace chose a black long-sleeve t-shirt and some old boxers with cats on them Haruta had given to him as a joke for his initiation into the clan.

Needless to say, he'd never worn them.

Returning to the bathroom, Ace dressed his human. The shirt engulfed the tiny body, making him look smaller than he actually was, and the boxers...well, they fit as well as they could. It was the best he could do at the moment.

'Maybe I should raid the human supply closet later to see if I can find something that actually fits him...' Ace mused as he moved on to scrubbing the kid's cheeks with a wash cloth. Underneath all that grime was tan skin, taut with youth.

After awkwardly brushing the boy's teeth (because he was determined to get him as clean as he possibly could...also slightly impressed with how well his teeth were maintained, considering the environment he'd lived in), Ace decided he was done, at least with getting him clean. Next, he needed to treat his wounds.

He rubbed an antibiotic cream into the hand wound and bandaged it securely before moving on to the legs. With no proper splint handy, Ace broke the legs off Thatch's plastic chair and secured them to the front and back of the boy's lower leg with strips of fabric.

Throughout all this, the boy didn't even stir.

Huffing, Ace walked to his closet, which was connected to the bathroom. It was fairly large with not a lot of clothes in it as he tended to only use his dresser out in the bedroom. Removing all clothing and hangers, he worked to make it into a suitable home for his human, at least for the time being.

About twenty minutes later, Ace moved the still unconscious boy into the closet where he'd placed a mattress on the floor for him (an extra that gave his own bed more support, but ultimately unnecessary). In an attempt to make him comfortable, Ace dressed the bed in sheets, a pillow, and a soft blanket from the linen closet on the floor...hopefully no one would notice a set was missing.

Laying him down on the mattress, Ace pulled out what he'd nabbed from Trafalgar's office while the vampire was still out: a chain with a connected ankle shackle. It was fairly short, only allowing him to move half-way into the bathroom (at least if the door was open) to use the toilet.



He really hated to do this, but it was for his own good.

Ace closed the shackle around the boy's left ankle and connected it to one of the now empty clothing rods, one in the very back of the closet. Satisfied it would hold, the freckled vampire pulled the blanket up over the tiny body, flinching when the kid instinctively nuzzled his face into the soft pillow.

Now that his human was settled, it was time for Ace to shower himself and get ready for the mystery gathering Marco had called, his sire making sure he knew it was mandatory for all vampires in the citadel.

Taking a few minutes to clean the dirt out of the tub (and any other evidence he'd left of the human), Ace stripped and stepped under the warm water. It was refreshing and helped to calm his nerves.

Once he was dressed properly in comfortable cargo pants and a black t-shirt (Ace didn't care for the kimonos worn by many of his family...they were a little too airy for his taste), he returned to the kid's new "room" with the captured bag in hand and sat on the floor.

Rummaging through it while listening the even breathes of his captive, Ace pulled out a change of clothes (which were as stiff as the ones he'd just thrown out), extra fabric, some random knick-knacks that honestly he didn't know what they were...in one of the side pockets, there was some string and a sewing needle, leading Ace to believe his human could sew, a useful ability.

Other than some dried food, rotting...something, and a ratty hat, Ace found nothing of interest, much to his dismay. Dumping it all on the floor, he searched the bottom of the bag thoroughly, not wanting to miss anything.

Suddenly, his hand felt something, a pocket sown into the inside of the bag. Tearing it apart with his sharp nails, Ace pulled out a necklace. It was quite beautiful with a silver chain and a simple, red bead pendant on the end.

Intrigued, Ace gently placed it on the carpet, returned all of the boy's belongings to his bag, and took everything out into the bedroom. Storing the bag under his bed, Ace walked out onto the balcony and held the pendant up to the light, smiling as it shimmered.

Seconds later, images began to course through his mind yet again.

He saw a younger version of himself, standing tall as someone placed a similar necklace around his neck, but his was white, almost clear.

*"...pride...my...love..."*

Ace gripped his head as the memory flowed freely, pain piercing through his body. The words were unclear, and he only caught a few at a time.

*"...blood...protect h-"*

It was getting to be too much, the voice consumed everything.

"...D..."

As suddenly as it came, the vision ended, leaving Ace on his knees breathing heavily. Clutching the necklace tightly in his hand, he paced his room to calm down. The vampire had no idea what it could mean as he'd never seen a pendant like that before.

"Oi, Ace, you in there?" A voice called, making Ace stop short. It was Fossa. "I'm gonna head down to the meeting if you want to join me."

"Y-Yeah, I'll be right out." He stuttered, frantically pulling on his boots. Ace stored the necklace in the top drawer of his nightstand and jogged quickly into the bathroom to check the boy's restraints one last time before leaving.

Ace quickly scrawled out a note to the kid, if he woke before he returned, telling him to stay quiet and not make a fuss, among other things. Leaving it next to the mattress he closed the closet door, securing it with metal wire from the outside along with making sure the light inside was set to low so the kid wouldn't be in the dark, but also not blinded.

"Thanks for waiting!" Ace chirped to Fossa, swinging the door to his room shut and locking it behind his back with his key, "I've gotta go check in with Izo, you okay with a pit stop?"

"Ah...yeah, that's fine." Fossa replied with a raised eyebrow.

Ace took a deep breath as they started to walk downstairs, hoping he could keep calm and act normal.

---

About thirty minutes later, Ace and Fossa entered the gathering hall, which was the center of the citadel geographically and socially. It was where they ate meals, had meetings, and occasionally cleared it for a game or sparring match.

Most everyone had already arrived and Ace blamed Izo. The fashionable vampire had to finish filing his nails before allowing him to report.

A quick glance out into the courtyard showed they weren't done processing the captured humans from the raid as the prisoners were being held in temporary pens throughout the yard. The metal cables surrounding them were electrified, so they weren't going anywhere. Some of the humans were injured and their blood smelled very appetizing, bringing a strange thought to mind...why didn't he feel the need to drink from his human, even when exposed to his blood multiple times?

"Ace-ya, how was your shower?"

The freckled vampire turned to face Trafalgar who was covered in dust and notably annoyed.

"Very nice, what about yours?" He teased, chuckling when the doctor rolled his eyes.

"Nonexistent, at least until this meeting is over." Trafalgar replied before sidling up close to him and whispering, "How did your search for the human boy go?"

Ace swallowed instinctively and tried to keep his voice steady as he answered.

"I couldn't find him, so he must've escaped. What about the female? Did she survive transport?"

"She's all right, just needs some medication and rest." Trafalgar answered, "My men already took her to the infirmary and are watching her closely." Ace smiled thinly, happy the subject of their conversation had shifted off him and the kid. That is, until Trafalgar leaned down to whisper in his ear.

"Come visit me in the infirmary Ace-ya, we need to talk about your...*obsessive* behavior in the field today."

"W-What? I don't need counseling or whatever-"

"Don't be so nervous." Trafalgar said with a smirk, "It's routine. I'm required to interview vampires who exhibit obsessive behavior to make sure it isn't anything that will impede their work. Vista-ya had to come see me last week."

Just as Ace was about to respond, Marco emerged through the inner doors, two unfamiliar vampires flanking him. Almost immediately, everyone began to whisper, causing him to look around in confusion.

"What is it?" He asked Trafalgar, who watched the three with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm...not sure. How strange to have two purebloods visit us here of all places. It's quite far from the main compounds."

Ace's eyes widened in surprise at the doctor's response. Purebloods? As in those born vampires? Weren't they like royalty or something?

"Settle down, yoi." Marco commanded, wearing a black cloak over his normal kimono. Even dressed casually, he demanded respect from his subordinates. Everyone shut up instantly. "As of today, there will be a change in the leadership of Moby. This is your new Lord, Eustass Kidd, son of Akagami, and Outlook Sabo, his second. I expect you all to afford them the same respect and obedience you have given me for so long."

Ace was in a word, shocked, as was everyone else, many of whom began to protest loudly.

"What!? That's ridiculous!"

"You're our only Lord, Marco! Pops' legacy...it was entrusted to you!"

His sire allowed the yelling for a few seconds before stamping his sandaled foot hard on the cement floor, silencing everyone.

"*Enough*, all of you. I appreciate your loyalty, but this is the will of the council, yoi. Do not disgrace Pops' name with your disrespect."

Ace glanced around as the previously raucous vampires lowered their heads before Marco, prompting him to do the same.

"It's all right, Lord Phoenix." The red-head put in as he moved to stand next to Marco and address the crowd, "This must be difficult for you to accept, two young nobles moving into your home. But know this, I have no intention of dismantling what the great Whitebeard created all those years ago. Naturally, Lord Phoenix will be my adviser. Please be patient with us as we learn your ways and work to keep this citadel prosperous!"

Ace was impressed with how well the pureblood spoke, but all he could think about was the fact that Marco wasn't in charge anymore. What would happen if his human was discovered!?

'I have to protect him.' Ace determined, fists clenching tightly at his sides, 'No one will take him from me...*no one*.'

---

Sabo shuffled nervously next to Kidd who'd taken to the attention with confidence. After the announcement, they'd moved into the crowd to mingle and get to know their new subordinates. He couldn't help but be envious of Kidd's incredible oration skills.

There was no way Sabo could've moved a group on the edge like that.

He shook a few hands, smiled, and tried not to look as uncomfortable as he felt.

"Relax...you're too tense." Kidd whispered, nudging him slightly. If only it was that simple... Sabo didn't think he'd ever get used to this part of nobility.

Slipping away briefly to get a drink, he bumped into someone.

"Ah, pardon me, I wasn't watching where I was going." He apologized while looking over the other. The vampire was turned young, with freckles and fiery eyes.

"Yeah, sorry..." He muttered, shooting Sabo a surprisingly hateful look. Had he done something to offend him?

"Mind your manners, Ace, yoi." Lord Phoenix interjected, moving to stand next to the younger, "I apologize, this is Ace, one of mine. He's a bit tired from today's raid."

"I see..." Sabo managed as the fiery vampire's head was pushed down in a mock bow by his sire, "I understand you took quite a few prisoners. May I ask why you destroyed the human colony?"

"One of the humans injured Haruta, and they needed to be brought to heel." Phoenix stated darkly, making Sabo shiver, "If you'd like, Trafalgar Law, our head of human care, can take you out to look at them and give you a tour of the stables, yoi?"

Sabo nodded, knowing Kidd wanted to get a feel for the layout and resource levels as soon as possible. The Phoenix Lord bowed shortly to him before releasing the younger vampire with a quiet word in his ear.

'Why does he hate me?' Sabo thought, discouraged, as Ace glared at him behind the Phoenix's back. Sighing, he turned to get Kidd so they could start learning all they could about the Moby Dick and its residents.

---

Luffy woke in a strange place, one he didn't recognize. Groaning and clutching his pounding head, the boy pushed himself into a sitting position as he tried to get his bearings.

He was in a small room with metal rods around the walls, on a very soft mattress adorned with equally soft blankets. As his eyes roamed the walls and door, a metal ring caught his attention. It had a chain attached to it, that ended...

Luffy's breath hitched as he threw off the blanket and stared in horror at the shackle. At that moment, everything came back to him. The raid, the vampire, a smooth voice...he'd been taken. The panicking boy tried to stand up but stopped when pain shot up his legs. They were bruised badly, and if the makeshift splint was any indication, his captor had discovered one of them really was broken.

Gently moving his legs off the mattress, Luffy buried his face in his hands, trying to calm down. His breathes came quickly, bringing with them a...pleasant smell?

Under closer inspection, Luffy was...clean, cleaner than he'd ever been in his whole life. Not only that, but his wounds were bandaged, his clothes were comfortable, and he felt...really good (aside from the fact that he was being held by a likely psychotic vampire).

He wasn't sure why he was wearing yellow shorts with cats on them, but they were much more comfortable than anything he'd ever made for himself.

Shuffling his feet, his toe stepped on something that crinkled under its weight. Looking down, it was a piece of paper. Picking it up with his uninjured hand, Luffy frowned down at the thing.

Honestly, he wasn't sure why he bothered; it wasn't like he could read a word of it.

Out in the wastes, no one bothered to learn to read unless you were stuck in a bunker or something for an extended period of time and had access to books. Considering paper was a hot commodity and very expensive, hardly anyone was literate. His mother could read, but never got a chance to teach him.

Tossing the paper to the side, Luffy slowly stood himself up with support from the wall and limped over to the door.

He tried the handle, but of course, it was locked.

Huffing, Luffy threw his weight against the wooden door, to no avail. He did this for a few minutes but wore himself out. Limping back to the mattress, he flopped down, honestly a little scared.

He'd never been one to frighten easily, but to have his freedom taken away and limited to a tiny room made him shudder with fear.

It brought back memories of *that* time.

His shaking stopped when a nearby door creaked open. Luffy listened intently as the door shut, shaking his prison.

Was the vampire back?

Footsteps made their way towards him, stopping just outside the room. Luffy shifted backwards into a more defensible position, determined not to let his fear show.

Seconds later, the door opened, and his dimly lit prison was illuminated with a brighter light. Blinking, the boy looked up into the face of his kidnapper, a freckled vampire with shoulder length raven hair.

"Good, you're awake." He said smoothly, looking down on his much smaller form, "I've got some questions to ask you."

## Chapter 4

Ace gently lowered himself to the floor in front of his captive, purposefully moving at a slow pace to not startle the boy, who was already very tense. Once seated, he leaned into his hand and peered at the little human who'd caused his behavior to change so drastically.

The poor thing was obviously scared, seating himself as far away from Ace as possible. The vampire's note was discarded on the floor in a crumbled heap.

"My name is Ace, what's yours?" He asked quietly, tracking the boy's tiny twitch at his question.

"I...I don't really want to tell you." The human admitted, curling his hands around the chain tethering him to the wall.

"Why not?"

"Because you're a vampire."

"I see." Ace said with a small chuckle, "Well then, how about this, you tell me your name, and you get to eat." He'd stored away a few apples and a muffin from the party he intended to feed to his human...given his obedience.

Ace took out the small bag of goodies and dangled it for the boy to see before placing it down in his lap. The kid was obviously hungry, salivating and swallowing at the sight of the food.

"L-Luffy. My name is Luffy." Ace smirked at the boy's quick admission and tossed him the bag of food.

"Good boy."

The human glared at him, not liking the comment, but dug into the food none the less. When he was just about finished, Ace tossed over a bottle of water which his captive eagerly opened and drank deeply.

He'd need to get more food for the human boy, Luffy. From what he'd seen of his ribs, the kid was malnourished, and there was no way he would let the kid starve.

"Luffy," Ace said smoothly, gaining the kid's attention immediately, "I brought you here for a specific reason, and I hope you will be able to help me."

"What do you want?" Luffy asked, wiping water from his mouth. The kid seemed genuinely curious, though it was veiled with tension and cautiousness.

"Do you...know me?" Ace asked, watching the boy carefully to gauge his response. Luffy's eyes narrowed and moved over him, searching.

"No, I don't."

Ace scoot forward a little, placing his face closer to the boy.

"Are you sure? You've never seen me before, not even in passing?"

"Like I said," Luffy replied somewhat nervously, shuffling back to the wall, "I don't know you." Realizing he was scaring the little one, Ace backed up and huffed, disappointed.

"Really? That's a bummer..."

They stayed silent for a few minutes while Ace contemplated his options. Did he really not know this human? But his visions were so...vivid. There was still something about this boy, Luffy...something he was missing.

"Um...do you have any more food?" The kid asked quietly, wringing his hands gently. Ace smirked back at him.

"I'll bring more later, but you only get it if you behave, okay Luffy?" The human bit his lip and nodded shortly, trembling a little.

Ace started when tears began to well up in Luffy's eyes, though he appeared to try hard to keep them in.

"Hey now, what's wrong?"

"N-Nothing!" Luffy sobbed, voice breaking as he curled up into a ball on the mattress. His movement caused the ankle shackle and chain to rattle, prompting a huff from Ace. He'd expected this, but at the same time, he didn't like being the cause of the boy's tears.

Moving quickly so the kid didn't have much time to react, Ace sat on the mattress and pulled Luffy into his lap.

"N-No! Please don't-" The boy cried, pushing against him and scrunching up his neck. Luffy thought he was going to drink from him.

Ace said nothing at first, just cradled him tightly.

Curiosity getting the better of him, the vampire gently exposed Luffy's neck and inhaled the kid's scent. Strangely enough, as he'd noticed, the human's blood didn't smell appetizing...it didn't smell like anything really. Why was that?

Very much aware of Luffy's shaking, Ace pulled away and held him firmly by the back of the neck so he could look into his eyes.

"It's okay, Luffy." He soothed, rubbing a thumb into the soft skin behind the boy's ear, "You're safe here, I won't hurt you...I couldn't."

Luffy blinked up at him with owlish eyes, confusion evident on his face. Using his other hand, Ace wiped away the kid's tears, shed or still nestled in the corner of his eye.



"Why...?" The boy asked, stock still, "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, kid." Ace admitted, pulling him into a hug and running a hand through his raven locks, "Neither do I."

---

Not long after the gathering, Sabo stood with Kidd, waiting for the head of human care to join them and give them a tour of their facilities. He'd only caught brief glimpses of their stables, but they appeared (at least from afar) to be in good condition and well-maintained.

"Apologies for the wait."

Sabo turned and bowed his head in greeting to the newcomer, a tall vampire with piercing grey eyes and many tattoos. He had dark circles under his eyes and was covered in dust.

"My name is Trafalgar Law, and I'm in charge of the humans."

"Thank you for taking the time to show us around." Sabo said with a small smile, "From what I understand you've had a long day." He'd never been one to speak up first, but humans had always fascinated him, and he was ready to see them.

"You must be Sabo-ya, correct?" Law mumbled before turning to Kidd, "And...Eustass-ya? Before we begin, please don't touch the humans unless given permission by myself or one of my keepers. Some of them can be aggressive."

"They aren't fully tamed?" Kidd questioned, voicing his concern. Sabo understood his confusion, as the humans given to nobility were always fully broken or sedated so there was no resistance.

"You aren't in the royal compounds anymore, Eustass-ya." Law explained with a chuckle, "Though some of our humans are bred here, most are captured in the wastes and do not take well to a captive lifestyle. It takes time to subjugate their spirits."

Sabo was practically glowing with excitement as Law led them to what he called "Stable A". It was a large building with fenced in areas outside of the pens for the humans to roam and get sunlight. He'd read in books that humans required something called "Vitamin D" from the sun to thrive, and it was fascinating to see in person.

Vampires didn't receive any such gift from the sun, just burns and heat stroke if you stayed outside for too long.

Inside the stable were stalls walled with metal bars. Each pen held approximately 3-5 humans, depending on their size.

"How many females do you currently have?" Kidd asked, peering in at what was obviously a pregnant human. She shied away and cupped her belly protectively.

"33." Law answered while checking the chart connected to the pen, "It was 32 until the raid today where we acquired another one." The vampire placed the chart back in its place, took out a pad, and typed something in.

"Is something wrong?" Sabo asked, trying not to show his excitement. He'd never been in a place like this before, with semi-wild humans! Maybe he'd get to see some truly wild ones!

"Not particularly, she's just due for another check-up." Law said while finishing his note, "Come, this stable is mostly full of our calmer humans. I imagine, Sabo-ya, you would like to see the others?"

"Yes, please!" Sabo exclaimed, ignoring Kidd's chuckle and eye roll.

Stable B was quite different from the first. The pens were much fuller, and the humans glared furiously at them.

"This stable and C are both designated for newcomers, so they are a bit overcapacity at the moment." Law said, taking the growls and glares of the prisoners in stride, "But, in my experience, it doesn't take long for them to adapt, given the right incentive."

At Law's statement, a few of the humans bristled. Moving his eyes through the throngs of humans, Sabo noted many were injured though their wounds had been cleaned and bandaged. Lord Phoenix took surprisingly good care of his humans.

"You blood-sucking bastards!" One of them yelled, making their group halt, "We won't submit...we're not your *cattle*!"

"Oh, but you are," Law said with a smirk, "and sheep should show more respect to their betters."

At that, they left the stable, leaving the fuming and screaming human behind. Sabo couldn't help but look back, frowning at the sight of the human male shaking the bars and spitting viciously. Would he be okay?

"Don't worry about him." Law stated, bringing him back to reality, "Many are like that early on."

"So that's what a wild human is like..." Sabo murmured to himself, "Fascinating..."

"Jeez, Sabo, try not to drool." Kidd teased, nudging him in the side. Sabo blushed, suddenly a little self-conscious. So, what if he thought humans were intriguing creatures...studying them was a hobby of his.

"If you'd like, Sabo-ya, you can come sit in on some of my sessions." Law offered, "It may give you a better taste of their...humanity."

"I would love to!" He exclaimed, giddy at the thought.

Overall, the tour was very informative. They learned that the Moby Dick had a total of seven stables, with an eighth being built, and approximately 200 humans (most of which were male). Though not a lot of humans compared to the royal compounds, which boasted tens of thousands, it was enough to feed the citadel.

What Sabo found most interesting was how well the humans were treated, likely because they weren't used just once. The humans he was used to would die after a single drink (either because of their poor health or the lack of time given to recover blood).

Most nobles did not know the meaning of restraint.

"Well, that's all there is to show, except for my clinic and the nursery." Law said with a yawn, "If you wish to see those, please do so on your own time. Excuse me." Sabo bowed to the man as he left.

"Not the friendliest bastard, is he?" Kidd snorted, "No respect for purebloods."

"Perhaps, but he is very talented, don't you think?" Sabo laughed, "The humans are in incredibly good health and seem to be breeding well. I think I'll visit the nursery tomorrow and see how the young ones are."

"Have fun with that."

Sabo chuckled and bade Kidd farewell, knowing the new Lord was likely going to read over the citadel's finances and other important documentation before the sun fully set.

'Ah, the responsibilities of a Lord...'

---

In a word, Luffy was confused.

Instead of drinking from him, his captor sniffed and hugged him before carrying him out into what was apparently his bedroom. It was large, with a massive bed, a dresser, desk, and other furniture pieces including a small sitting room with a fireplace. It was really nice, better than anything Luffy had ever seen before.

In his opinion, the best part of the room was the private balcony which provided a view of the courtyard since they were about three floors up. It was amazing to see green trees and running water, though he tried to hide his amazement from his captor.

Currently, Luffy was seated on the soft couch, unsure of what to do. The vampire had taken off his ankle shackle, but he couldn't walk very well, so trying to escape wasn't an option.

The freckled vampire, Ace, was on the other side of the room talking into some kind of wall-mounted communication device. He'd given Luffy a glass of water and warned him to be quiet while he was speaking. So, not wanting to incur the vampire's wrath, Luffy did as he was told and quietly sipped the crisp, crystal clear water.

'I've never had water like this before...' He thought, licking his lips. Then again, there were a lot of things in Ace's room he had never seen before, at least not in a pristine state. Case and point: the entire bathroom outside of "his room", as Ace called it.

He'd seen a toilet before, but not a working one. In the wastes, you just dug a hole.

Shivering slightly from the chill of the open balcony, Luffy shuffled closer to the roaring fire. The environment inside the citadel was very different from outside, cool instead of sweltering.

The boy flinched when Ace finished his call and walked over to him, choosing to sit across the table in a beautifully carved wooden chair.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked, eyes flicking to Luffy's glass, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you...just wanted to make sure you were secure while I was gone."

"I...I don't like small spaces." Luffy admitted, averting his gaze. What was he supposed to say? He jumped when Ace's cold and clawed hand reached over to take the glass from his shaking ones. Luffy hadn't even noticed they were trembling.

"What can I do to make you trust me?" Ace asked, leaning back to place the glass down on the table.

"Let me go." Luffy said without hesitation, meeting the vampire's eyes again. The grey orbs softened, but he shook his head.

"I can't do that."

"Why not? You say you care for me, but I'm chained up in your closet-"

Ace stopped him with a snarl, eyes turning red for a split second. Luffy swallowed nervously and lowered his gaze.

"Look...you being here is a violation of the rules." Ace explained with a sigh, "Admittedly, I didn't plan this very far ahead, but if you're discovered, both of us will pay the price. Me, severe punishment, and you...I'm honestly not sure."

Luffy fiddled with the bandages on his right hand while the vampire spoke. So...he was contraband?

"That's why I need you to stay quiet and behave, especially when I'm not here." Ace said seriously, "I have no intention of drinking from you, I just want to take care of you, for reasons I can't explain."

The boy frowned, chewing on his bottom lip. If he wasn't there to be food, then what was he? A pet? That was even worse!

"I'm not your pet." Luffy whispered with what courage he could scrounge up. Ace's eyes narrowed, but he didn't seem angry.

"No...you're not my pet. To be honest, I'm not sure what you are to me." He admitted before standing up and moving to his bedside table and fishing around the top drawer, "Though, I think this might hold some answers."

The second Ace held up the pendant, Luffy pushed himself into a standing position, ignoring the pain in his legs.

"Give that back!" He demanded, holding himself up with the arm of the couch. Ace tilted his head.

"What is it?"

"It was a gift from my parents, give it back!"

"I see...and where are your parents now?" The vampire asked, closing his fist around the necklace.

"Dead." He sobbed, "Killed by a vampire." Ace's eyes widened slightly at that, face contorting into an expression of concern...a strange look for a vampire.

"I'm sorry. Living in the wastes without them must've been difficult. Do you have anyone else, siblings or friends to travel with?"

"No one." Luffy sniffled, "I'm...I'm alone, have been for a long time."

Just as his legs were about to give out, Ace was there, helping him sit back down. He struggled a little, but it was no use against the strength of his vampire captor. Surprising him, Ace opened his palm and placed the necklace in it, using his clawed fingers to close Luffy's much skinnier digits around it.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have pried. Perhaps you can tell me more about it later."

Luffy yelped as Ace scooped him up and carried him back into "his room". He gazed longingly outside, wanting to stay where the outdoors was visible. Unfortunately, it was not to be, and he was dropped back onto his mattress.

He didn't resist as the shackle was replaced on his ankle.

"I have to go now," Ace explained in a slow voice, "I'll be gone for a few hours, but when I return, I'll have more food for you. This time, I won't close the door, so you can use the bathroom as you wish. Feel free to drink from the faucet."

Luffy looked down as Ace ruffled his hair, making him feel more and more like a pet despite the vampire's assurance that he wasn't one. He was forced to look up as his captor gently lifted his chin with a clawed finger.

"Be good."

At that, the vampire left, leaving Luffy alone in the dim closet.

---

Ace huffed as he walked through the citadel. As it turned out, taking care of a human was a lot harder than he thought it would be...especially since said human was terrified of him.

'I understand why though.' He mused, turning a corner, 'Parents killed by vampires...he's had to live alone for so long... How old is he anyway? Did he get that scar on his chest when his parents were killed?'

It was plausible, but Ace simply didn't have enough information. Hopefully over the next week or so, he'd get to know Luffy better. He'd feel better leaving him alone in his room if he had the boy's trust.

For the moment, he put those thoughts out of his mind, focusing instead on steadily knocking on the large door in front of him.

"Enter."

Ace pushed the door open and softly closed it behind him before looking up to meet Marco's cool gaze. His sire was seated on a mat in front of the fireplace in the sitting area of his suite. The elder vampire's bedroom could be accessed via the door on the right wall.

Marco still wore the same kimono he'd worn all day, so he hadn't changed yet.

"Come, sit down, yoi." His sire beckoned, patting the rug in front of him. Ace sighed, knowing what was coming. Unfortunately, they had to do this every two weeks or so. Marco had called him earlier, summoning him to his chambers for the renewal of his mark.

"Don't act so excited." Marco teased as Ace removed his shirt, plopping down with his back facing the elder vampire.

"Yeah, because I love doing this..." He mumbled, shuffling in anticipation.

On his back was a large tattoo, Whitebeard's mark. He'd had it for as long as he could remember. From what he knew, every turned vampire in the citadel had one, but his was... unruly. As his sire, Marco had been the one to emblazon it, but for some reason, his body kept rejecting it.

If he went too long without a renewal, Ace would get very ill. The first time it happened, he convulsed and eventually blacked out. No one would tell him what happened during that time, but he'd destroyed a good portion of the citadel.

The evidence left behind included scorch marks and the smell of cinders.

Ace grunted as Marco's hand touched the mark, making it burn red hot. Hissing at the pain, he endured it. The whole process took about two minutes. First, Marco would activate the mark (occasionally used to control unruly turned vampires, though it could only be activated by their sire), then he would let his own blood flow down Ace's back until it was absorbed into the raised skin.

Once Marco finished, he slumped over his knees, breathing heavily.

"How do you feel, yoi?" The elder vampire asked, rubbing his back with a cool cloth.

"Just peachy..." He answered through gritted teeth. They sat in silence for a few minutes until Ace's pain finally began to numb and he sat up.

"I'm sorry we have to do this so often." Marco soothed, reaching over to the low table to pour some tea for them.

"It's fine, I don't mind." Ace said as he gratefully accepted the steaming cup, "It's my body's fault for rejecting your blood, I guess."

When a human was turned, their blood was taken and replaced with their sire's, which eventually became their own. In Ace's case, according to Trafalgar anyway, his body refused to accept Marco's blood. Thankfully, with direct treatments into his mark, they could avoid any...unsavory side effects.

"Ace...how do you feel about the new leadership here, yoi?" Marco asked, bringing his cup down to rest on his lap, "Earlier, you seemed...agitated." Frowning, he tried to remember what his sire was talking about.

"What do you...Oh, you mean with the blonde noble." Ace said with furrowed brows, "I don't know, I think it's wrong of the council to demote you just because you're not 'pure' or whatever. It'll be weird without you in charge. I just don't want things to change."

"I understand." Marco replied, smiling slightly, "Out of everyone, I'm the most frustrated, but please, try to respect their authority, yoi. Eustass Kidd will officially take over as Lord tomorrow, and I imagine things will be different, but the people here are the same. We won't change."

"Yeah." Ace agreed, smiling at the thought of his family, the Whitebeards. They were great, and always there for him. Maybe...he could be that for his human, for Luffy. He didn't have a family anymore...so perhaps he could fill that gap.

---

A few minutes after Ace left his room, Thatch entered, coming out of Marco's bedroom where he'd been waiting.

"Well, What do you think?" His friend asked, moving to sit on the floor with him.

"I'm not sure, yoi." Marco replied slowly, "The seal seems to be holding, but it was definitely more difficult this time. Something is different." Thatch hummed and closed his eyes.

"Do you think it has to do with that human boy he showed us? Law seems to think so."

"Perhaps." Marco said with a frown, "Either way, we need to protect Ace. If the purebloods find out what he is, it will be disastrous, yoi. In the meantime, keep an eye on him and report anything suspicious."

Thatch nodded and stood, giving Marco a sorrowful look.

"Do you regret it? Not killing him, I mean."

"No." Marco replied firmly, "He's family, regardless of his blood, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep him safe, yoi."

## Chapter 5

Luffy woke to the unfamiliar sound of birds tweeting, and the smell of something delicious. The birds he was used to didn't sound nearly as...sweet. It was like the tinkling of bells, pleasant.

Yawning as he woke, the boy sat up on his mattress and was surprised to see sunlight streaming into the vampire's bedroom. It had been close to dark when he'd laid down...how long had he slept?

That question was answered when Ace stepped into the bathroom, a toothbrush sticking out of his mouth and no shirt on his torso.

"Good morning, Luffy. You sure slept a long time." The vampire managed before taking out the toothbrush and spitting into the sink, "I've got breakfast for you if you're hungry."

As much as he wanted to say no, the truth was, Luffy was starving.

"I tried to wake you up last night, but you were out cold." Ace commented while wiping his mouth, "Must've been tired, huh?"

Luffy just shuffled in place, chewing on his lower lip, not wanting to think about how vulnerable he must've been. He looked up when Ace turned around to grab a shirt on the bathroom vanity and looked over his tattoo with awe.

It was a mark he recognized, the sigil of Whitebeard.

Their clan was known to be dangerous and protective of their own, but also progressive in dealing with captive humans. From what rumors he'd heard, they were treated much better than at other citadels. Which was one of the reasons he had intended to drop Makino as close to their citadel as possible.

Less chance of her being taken by someone worse.

'Now I know why the sanctuary was raided.' Luffy mused as Ace pulled a sleeveless shirt over his head, thinking back to the man who'd bragged about killing a vampire. He wondered if Makino was alright...along with Woop Slap.

"C'mere, it's time for food." Ace said, interrupting his thoughts. Luffy tensed as the vampire released him from the shackle and picked him up, much like he had the day before. The balcony door was open, allowing a pleasant wind and bright sunshine to come through.

Ace placed him on the couch where a tray of...something...waited for him. Luffy peered quizzically down at the strange, round things on the plate. He recognized the garnish as fruit, but what were these, delicious smelling fluffy things?



"You look...confused." Ace stated, sitting down next to him, "Have you never seen pancakes before?"

Luffy shook his head, mouth drooling at the incredible smell. These were called 'pancakes'? Ace chuckled and reached across him for a bottle with a yellow label on it, popped it open, and drenched the fluffy cakes in the viscous liquid.

"When paired with syrup, these things are the best. There're strawberries on top and chocolate milk to drink. Eat up, squirt!"

Deciding to ignore the 'squirt' nickname for the moment, Luffy picked up the fork and cut into the pancakes. The metal fell through the soft cake like it was nothing. He slowly brought the bite to his mouth and closed his lips around it.

It took a second for the taste to register, and his eyes widened. It was...sweet, and incredibly delicious! Luffy knew Ace was smiling down at him, probably laughing inwardly, but he didn't care, all he wanted to do was eat these amazing pancakes!

"I knew you'd like it!" Ace put in while Luffy stuffed his face, "Just be careful not to eat too fast."

They sat in silence while Luffy finished his breakfast, eating his fill. It had been a long time since he'd had so much food. Once he finished, the boy looked next to him where Ace was sipping on a glass of the chocolate milk, which he had already decided was equally as delicious as the magical fluffy cakes.

"Something wrong?" Ace asked, noticing his stare. Starting, Luffy stumbled with his words.

"U-Um...I was just wondering; don't you need b-blood?"

"Yeah, but I'll get some later." The vampire informed him, "Human food doesn't sate my hunger like it does you, but I still enjoy the taste."

Luffy hummed, reaching down to pluck the last strawberry off the plate, softly smiling when the fruit's taste filled his mouth.

"I'm glad you liked it, munchkin."

At that, Luffy couldn't help but turn back to the vampire with a raised eyebrow. First 'squirt', and now 'munchkin'? Ace smiled sheepishly back at him, fangs peeking out from behind his lips.

"Ah...that wasn't right either, huh? I've been trying to think of a good nickname for you, but so far I'm falling short."

"Erm...okay?" Luffy replied softly. It wasn't like he could stop the vampire from giving him a nickname...but maybe he could give feedback, so it wasn't awkward, like 'munchkin'. That was a pretty bad one, made him self-conscious about his height (especially compared to the tall and broad Ace).

The freckled vampire quickly finished off his milk and stood up to stretch.

"Before I go..." Ace trailed off as he knelt in front of him, taking off the makeshift splint to look over his broken leg. In Luffy's eyes, it looked much better, the bruises were already starting to turn yellow. "You heal quick...what about the other one?"

Luffy winced as Ace pushed gently on the other, unbroken leg. It was bruised a little worse, though the bone itself seemed to be okay.

While the vampire tied the splint back in place, Luffy gathered up his courage, knowing Ace was about to put him back into the closet.

"...Ace?"

"Yeah?"

"I...I-I want to stay out here." Luffy managed, "Please, I swear I won't go anywhere or-or try anything!" Ace's eyes narrowed for a second, before softening.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea."

Luffy sniffled and turned his attention to the open balcony where white curtains swayed in the breeze.

"I want to be where the sun is, please." He didn't particularly want to beg, but he REALLY didn't want to be put back in the small space. Bending his body almost in half, Luffy bowed, hoping his show of submission would convince Ace.

As he bent over, his pendent slipped out of his shirt and hung down around his neck.

Beside him, Ace sighed, lifting Luffy's head up with a hand.

"All right, you can stay out here, BUT-" He emphasized, tightening his grip on Luffy's chin, "You don't leave this room under any circumstance and don't stand up on the balcony, someone could spot you."

Luffy nodded vigorously, content to obey those rules as long as he could have free reign of the room. Releasing his grip on him, Ace tilted his head, seemingly in thought.

"I've got it!" The vampire exclaimed, startling Luffy, "Lu! That's what I'll call you!"

The nickname sparked something deep in his heart, involuntarily making tears form in his eyes. Ace's smile immediately dropped and he gently touched Luffy on the shoulder.

"I-Is that not good? I'm sorry, please don't cry!"

"N-No, it's just-" Luffy sobbed, "That's what my mom used to call me."

Ace straightened and looked down on him with sorrow in his eyes. Luffy wiped his eyes, but the salty streams just kept coming. The vampire gently pulled him in for a hug, rubbing his

back soothingly.

"Do you want me to call you something else? I've got a ton more possible nicknames to try, like lambchop."

Luffy couldn't hold in the quiet laugh that bubbled up from his chest at that absolutely horrendous pet name.

"Please don't call me that." The boy managed, bottom lip no longer trembling as it curved into a tiny smile. Held close to Ace's chest, he could feel the vampire's deep, vibrating laugh.

"Well then, if it's okay with you...I'd like to call you Lu."

The boy considered it for a moment. It had taken him by surprise, but surprisingly, it didn't feel *wrong* to him. It was like, he didn't mind Ace calling him that, which was strange considering this was the vampire who'd kidnapped him and was holding him against his will.

'Maybe it's the freckles...they remind me of Mom.'

Luffy huffed and pulled back from Ace, meeting the other's gaze. The vampire was tense as he waited for his response.

"Okay, you can call me 'Lu', but *only* if I can move my bed out here, in the sun, and no more chain."

"Deal." Ace agreed with a smirk, reaching to ruffle Luffy's hair, "Just as long as you're quiet and don't draw attention to yourself. Remember what will happen if you're discovered."

Luffy nodded, pleased that he could move out of the closet.

The next few minutes consisted of Ace dragging his mattress and pillow out of the closet and placing them next to his own bed, in view of the balcony, but not of the door that lead into the citadel. The space in between the sitting area and Ace's bed made for a snug fit, but it worked.

Once Ace finished, he jogged back to his bed and threw on a jacket.

"All right, I've gotta go. I'll be back later, not sure when."

Luffy shifted on the couch, testing how his legs would do without Ace's support. It still hurt to put weight on them, but he should be okay. When he looked up, his breath hitched at the sight of Ace, right in front of him.

"I'm trusting you to behave, Lu." Ace said in a serious tone, making Luffy swallow, "Please don't do anything to make me regret that decision."

Luffy inclined his head quickly, not wanting to be stuck back in the closet. Ace smiled, seemingly pleased.

"Good."

Just like that, the vampire left, locking the door behind him.

---

'Today's the day!' Sabo thought while struggling to button his shirt because his hands were shaking so much, 'I need to look professional and present myself in a way suitable to that of a Lord's second...no pressure.'

Honestly, he was just making himself more nervous.

"Sabo, you ready?"

The blonde vampire turned to address Kidd, who'd just entered his room, only to stare. The red-head looked...impressive. He wore his usual black boots and yellow-spotted pants but had changed his shirt to a deep scarlet one that complimented the rare fur coat that was draped across his shoulders. The new shirt left his chiseled chest exposed, highlighting the crisscross of leather straps that held his many knives and pistol.

"Wow, you look great." Sabo complimented, "Though, a little like a warlord don't you think?"

"Isn't that the point?" Kidd huffed, running a hand through his vibrant red hair, "In this world, you've got to look the part."

"I suppose." He chuckled, glancing down at his own outfit which seemed so meager in comparison. Perhaps he should try one of the kimonos favored by the current residents of the Moby Dick? They seemed comfortable and might help him fit in with the citadel culture.

After a quick brush of his hair, Sabo followed Kidd out into the hallway and down to the gathering hall. Most of the commanders were already there, summoned by their new Lord to discuss some changes. Kidd had already briefed him on what he wanted to do, and Sabo was anxious to see how it would be received.

Lord Phoenix was waiting for them on a slightly raised portion of the stone.

"Good morning." The Phoenix greeted, "Please take a seat, we're only waiting for a few more to arrive, yoi."

Kidd nodded and sat down cross-legged on a mat laid out for them. Sabo bowed to the elder vampire first before lowering himself to sit at the red-head's left.

Some of the late comers Sabo recognized, like the head of human care, Trafalgar Law. The grey-eyed vampire was dressed in a black kimono with the front open, allowing his tattoos to be seen. Unsurprisingly, Law appeared more rested than he had the night before.

"Everyone's here, yoi." Lord Phoenix informed them while taking a seat to Kidd's right, "You may begin whenever you're ready."

---

Ace was pleased, happy even.

He felt like he'd connected a little with Lu, his bumbling, unsure, adorable human who'd never seen pancakes before. And to think, the boy would allow him, a vampire, to use a nickname given by his mother...Ace was honored.

Admittedly, the nickname didn't really *feel* like his idea. It just came to him, like he knew the boy was 'Lu'.

"What type do you want, Ace?" Whitey Bay asked, bringing him back to reality.

"Just whatever...I'm not feeling picky this morning."

The Blood Depository was where all the blood taken from the captive humans was processed and sorted. It was also where most went for breakfast. Sometimes, Thatch would take over the kitchen and make some blood-laced waffles or something, but he was in a meeting this morning with the rest of the commanders.

"O it is then." Whitey teased, smirking as she handed him a glass of blood, "You're in a good mood this morning, normally you demand A." Ace gratefully took the glass and inhaled deeply. Nothing could beat the intoxicating scent of blood in the morning.

"Hey, even I can have a good morning every once in a while."

Ace waved to Whitey before she could demand the reason for his giddiness and went to sit at one of the tables in the courtyard. It was nice and cool in the citadel, as it normally was. He wondered if it was going to rain, based on the color of the clouds.

Their weather machines could be scheduled, but Marco usually let them go to work "naturally". Once they'd merged with the atmosphere above, there was no need to regulate them, it would rain or get windy when the sky decided.

Glancing up to the top of the wall, Ace could just barely make out dust, the only thing that ever came out of the wastes.

'I can't believe Lu survived out there for so long...' He considered, taking a sip of his blood. Sitting outside, Ace was given a good view of two of stables. Inside the fences, he could see the huddled forms of their captive humans.

It was strange, but Ace actually...felt sorry for them. Having their freedom taken away must have been difficult, though living inside the citadel and provided shelter was better than living out in the wastes...right?

True to his prediction, small raindrops began to fall just as Ace finished his breakfast. Walking back inside, he couldn't help but stop and watch the humans scramble into the indoor portion of their pens.

'I wonder how Lu's doing...'

Dropping off his now empty cup, Ace made his way through the citadel towards Law's clinic, where he was supposed to have his "interview". He'd need to be careful what he said.

Trafalgar Law was notoriously difficult to fool.

It was about a five minute walk from the Blood Depository to the clinic, and when he opened the door, it was surprisingly empty.

"Ah, Ace, good to see you!" Shachi, one of Law's keepers, greeted, "Law's still in that meeting the new Lord called, but he should be here in not too long."

"Thanks." He returned, taking a seat. It made him feel like a sick patient...waiting in the lobby for the doctor to see him.

Ace busied himself with examining the clinic, and those in it. To the left were rooms where vampires were treated, and to the right was a guarded area sick or injured human were taken. Law's head of security, Jean Bart stood guard, stoic as ever.

After ten-minutes, Ace felt himself slump down in his chair.

'I'm bored...I hope Lu is keeping himself entertained, and out of trouble.'

---

Luffy sneezed, almost knocking over his pyramid of books. He barely managed to steady it and looked nervously towards the door, hoping no one heard him.

After a few minutes of nothing, the boy relaxed and turned his attention back to his creation. He'd looked through a few of them, all taken from Ace's bookshelf, but since he couldn't read...what was the point? So, Plan B, was put in motion.

The pyramid looked pretty cool, in his opinion, but he needed some more for the top. Carefully standing, Luffy limped back to the shelf and plucked a small book off the top. Cradling it to his chest, the boy sat and opened it, drawn in by the pretty colors on the cover.

Amazingly, this book had pictures! All of the other ones were just words. Flipping the pages gently, Luffy found himself smiling at the colorful animals portrayed. He wasn't sure what the premise of the story was, but the main character was a puppy!

Luffy loved dogs.

He'd seen a few during his travels, they always barked and licked his face. Most of the time, their owners didn't really appreciate that, but Luffy would find ways to sneak them pets.

The boy yelped when some water from outside blew onto his face, startling him. Worried the books would be damaged, Luffy quickly worked to put them back on the shelf (pouting that his pyramid didn't get finished), all except for the puppy book, which he stored next to his bed, intending to look at it more later. He could've just closed the balcony door, but he didn't...not when he wanted to experience the rain firsthand.

Once finished, Luffy padded towards the balcony where he sat just inside the room. The rain was beautiful and so refreshing.

He put his hand up and caught the little droplets in his hand, pleased with the feel.

'It really is a completely different world inside a citadel.' Luffy mused, rubbing his wet fingertips together. A few minutes later, he stood up and turned back to the warm room, his gilded cage.

Ace was...surprisingly nice but who knew what he was really thinking. He had yet to fully explain why he wanted Luffy, something that the boy thought about often. What was the vampire planning for him? Should he be trying harder to escape?

Shaking his head, Luffy decided to focus on his current task: exploring the massive room while his captor was gone. Who knew what he'd find?

---

Ace was awoken by a none-to-gentle kick to his left shin. Siting up at the pain, he nearly head-butted Law who was leaning over him.

"Enjoy your nap, Ace-ya?"

"Ouch...what the hell was that for!?"

"Drooling on my newly upholstered chair." Law chuckled while waving for him to follow. Grumbling profanities under his breath, Ace did as he was told and entered the older vampire's private office, closing the door behind him.

"How was the meeting this morning?" Ace asked, shocked at the time (inwardly of course). Had he really just slept for two and a half hours in a hard, clinic chair!? He was going to regret that later.

"It was...interesting." Law stated as he brought out some papers and a clipboard, "Let's just say that Eustass-ya is very ambitious."

"How so?"

The doctor sighed and motioned above him with his pen, towards the map of the area surrounding the citadel. It was a good map, showing the ruined city to their east and even beyond to where the mountains began.

"Apparently, he wants to expand the Moby Dick and its territory." Law explained dryly, "That would of course include clearing out all of the human colonies, taking back the city, refreshing the lake and rivers...not to mention angering the other citadels that border our current territory."

Ace's mouth dropped open. That was a huge undertaking!

"Are we capable of that!?"

"Possibly." Law answered, "But our human stores are already over-capacity, so the expansion would need to happen slowly. Eustass-ya has already called for more scouting missions into the city and its surrounding area. It seems he intends to make an impression on the council, in a big way, which means more work for you and me..."

Ace huffed, not liking the sound of that. Mostly because it meant more time away from Lu. He didn't want the kid to be alone *all the time*. Law cleared his throat and leaned forward, a knowing smirk on his face.

"But enough about the meeting, let's talk about you, Ace-ya."

"Okay..." He mumbled, shuffling uncomfortably in his chair.

"I'll get straight to the point." Law continued, "What is it about the boy from your photo that inspires such...emotion in you? Also, please regale me with the details of your pursuit of him back in the colony, I'm all ears."

Ace swallowed nervously; hands clammy. This was going to be difficult. He'd need to tell *mostly* the truth, with some lies sprinkled in, or Law would be see straight through him!

"It was weird, seeing his picture for the first time." Ace started, "I felt like I knew him...or *needed* to know him. Just seeing his face sparked some...I don't know, *visions* that have been happening on and off since."

"I see...what have these 'visions' entailed?"

"Usually, people. Sometimes it's me, but mostly two particular ones: a man and a woman, show up...real blurry though so I'm not sure what they truly look like, but it's never the boy from my picture." The freckled vampire explained, "Could these be memories from my time as a human?"

Law hummed, jotting down some notes on his clipboard.

"It's entirely probable, which means the human child is connected to you somehow, or at least he used to be. It's strange that one so young has prompted these 'memories' when you yourself was re-born only sixteen years ago... I'm assuming, since you didn't bring him in, he eluded you back at the colony." Law's gaze was steely, calculating, and unashamedly made Ace sweat.

"Er, yeah, I couldn't find him. He must've gotten out. Either that, or he hid himself really well."

"...So, you're telling me that you ran around the colony and found no trace of him."

"Yep." Ace chirped, voice an octave higher than he'd intended. Crap. Law's eyes narrowed.

"Ace-ya, are you hiding something from me? Because that would be unwise." The freckled vampire shook his head furiously.

"Of course not! I would never do that."

Law raised an eyebrow, definitely not buying it. Damn, why was lying so HARD!

"Today, I will give you the benefit of the doubt," The tattooed doctor said, making Ace release the breath he'd been holding, "only because of the ridiculous amount of work Eustass-



ya has given me, along with Sabo-ya's training."

"Great! So... I can go then?"

Trafalgar sighed and waved him out, ending the torturous session. Ace wasted no time in exiting the clinic, hoping...no...PRAYING, the older vampire bought his story.

---

'Ace-ya is such a bad liar, it's painful.' Law thought, leaning on his hands to watch the fledgling leave, 'It's obvious he's done something...likely with the human.'

The only question was, what to do about it.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sabo bit his lip tightly to try and keep from appearing over-excited as he made his way down the winding corridors towards Trafalgar's clinic. He was finally going to learn more about humans and step into his new role!

As Sabo turned the corner, the clinic's door flew open and a familiar face exited.

'What was his name again...Ash? No...Ace.' The blonde pureblood mused, watching the freckled vampire briefly lean against the wall. Ace was flustered and breathing irregularly. Did something happen?

Deciding to take the opportunity presented (because it bugged him that one of his new subordinates disliked him already, when he hadn't done anything yet!), Sabo fully entered the hallway and greeted Ace cheerfully.

"Hey there! Your name's Ace, right?"

The freckled vampire immediately straightened up and frowned at him. Sabo glanced down at Ace's hands, noting the sweat, but didn't drop his smile.

"Er...yeah. You're one of the purebloods, Sabo."

"That's correct! Today's my first day of leadership and I am quite excited to learn under Dr. Trafalgar, he seems very skilled. Do you know him well?"

Ace huffed and shoved his clammy hands inside his front pockets.

"Not really, I haven't been around long enough."

Sabo hummed, remembering that Ace was one of Lord Phoenix's turned. How long had he been a vampire? They appeared to be approximately the same age, but Ace retained his appearance from when he was turned...never aging. Sabo, on the other hand, would age slowly.

*Very slowly.*

Purebloods aged much like humans in their younger years but slowed significantly once they reached their prime. Plus, they could live for centuries, a stark difference to the weaker human species.

"Sorry...but I've gotta go." Ace quickly put in, eyes darting down the hallway. Sabo felt a little dejected. He wasn't much of a speaker (like Kidd), but he was known to be quite likeable. What was it about him that Ace found so...distasteful? He wasn't going to give up that easily!

"Ah, I see. That's too bad, perhaps we can speak again?" Sabo stated hopefully, widening his smile.

"...I guess," Ace replied, avoiding eye contact, "but I'm a scout so I probably won't be around much."

Sabo flinched, recognizing that statement as "go away, I don't want to see you again" ...so unfriendly. Still, Ace being a scout brought on many opportunities.

"Oh really? Do you think you could show me the ropes sometime?" He inputted smoothly, smirking inwardly at Ace's surprised look, "My family doesn't appreciate the art of combat so I am not as well versed as I should be."

"That's...surprising." Ace admitted, "But hey, if you want to get your ass kicked in front of your new subordinates, I won't stop you."

Sabo smirked at that, knowing the freckled vampire couldn't resist. After all, who would waste the opportunity to beat a pureblood in battle, especially one who you hated for some reason.

"I'll take you up on that."

Ace shot him one last glare before leaving, silver eyes hard. Sabo didn't falter though and simply kept up his grin, not relaxing until the raven-haired man was out of sight.

Hopefully, they would be able to overcome their differences through a good, old fashioned fight.

Finally entering the clinic, Sabo was met with the tall form of Trafalgar, smirking at him from directly inside the door.

"Challenging Ace-ya to a fight? I see it hasn't taken you long to figure him out."

"I merely wish to communicate with him in whatever way he understands best." Sabo defended, clearing his throat, "It would be unbecoming to not get along with a subordinate."

"...well, good luck with that." Trafalgar said while waving dismissively, a smirk still plastered on his face, "Ace-ya is no pureblood, but he's one of our best fighters... despite his youth."

"May I ask how old he is?"

"He was turned at the human age of twenty, sixteen years ago."

So, in human years, Ace was thirty-six. Compared to the endless lifespan of vampires, he was still a child, not that Sabo could talk, being only twenty-two himself.

He was drawn out of his thoughts when Trafalgar plopped four massive binders into his arms, startling him.

"These are the files on the humans kept in Stables D and E. If you would be so kind, please peruse them and get used to the document format." Law instructed, patting the thick binders, "We keep very detailed records and have a strict harvesting schedule."

"R-Right..." Sabo mumbled, sitting and flipping open the top one. Each human's chart was a different length, depending on their age, blood type, presence of wounds, etc. At the top was their tracking number, which was connected to their tag, and a "designation", something Sabo wasn't familiar with. "What does this mean?"

Law bent over the paper and peered at the words in question.

"During initial processing, we give them a new name." Trafalgar explained, "It helps to disconnect them from their past life and cements their place in the citadel."

Sabo chuckled, enjoying the idea. It was much easier to call a human something that wasn't a five digit number. Though, he did feel bad for this particular human who ended up with "Pickle".

That was just unfortunate.

"Once you're done, we'll make rounds to the stables so you can get firsthand experience." Law explained, busying himself with the coffee maker located on another vampire's desk, "You'll have to let me know if you find anything...*unsatisfactory* in my work, oh great Second."

Sabo could practically taste the sarcasm in the air. Obviously, the head of human care was not pleased his position was now overseen by an amateur. Though supervising Trafalgar's department was a part of his new job description (per Kidd's instructions), Sabo bet he'd be spending a lot more time going over finances and resources of the citadel...considering the smooth system Law had already created.

"I assure you; I have no intention of challenging your expertise." Sabo quickly stated, "The system you've created for Lord Phoenix-"

"Master Whitebeard." Law interrupted, prompting a confused 'huh' from Sabo, "I did not create this system, as you call it. All I do is maintain what the Master began when he built this citadel, along with his ideals. You and your friend would do well to remember who truly rules here."

"O-Of course." He stuttered, honestly shocked. Trafalgar was a lot older than he originally thought. "I would never want to change what the original Lord implemented. After all, if it ain't broke..." Law chuckled before taking a sip of his now brewed coffee.

"Resorting to old human expressions? You are a strange one, Sabo-ya."

Glad he'd managed to lighten the mood, he closed the top binder and moved on to the next one.

"You should really spend more time examining the documentation." Law chided, poking the binder Sabo set aside.

"Ah, I already have it memorized." The pureblood explained, reveling a little in the other vampire's raised eyebrow, "It's a...skill of mine."

"Whatever you say, Sabo-ya."

---

The first place they went after he'd finished going through the binders for Stables D and E was the nursery, a place Sabo was particularly excited to see. The royal compounds didn't have any young children, their humans were "imported" from farms and the like.

The younglings were kept inside the citadel as opposed to the stables. The wing was sectioned off and guarded heavily, though all it took was one look at Trafalgar, and they were given entry.

The nursery itself appeared to consist of multiple rooms with beds, toys, and anything else the little ones would need. What surprised Sabo was the presence of adult females who frowned at them when they entered and held their babes closer.

"You allow them to raise their own?" He whispered, not wanting to frighten the children, many of whom were running around in play, laughing.

"Their mothers know best how to nurture them." Law replied, watching the little ones play with a calculating gaze, "Remember, Sabo-ya, our goal here is to raise healthy humans as naturally as possible. We treat them well and receive blood in return without a fuss. The women know this and teach their children accordingly."

His logic was sound, at least in Sabo's mind, but different from what he'd grown up with.

"What about-"

"Master Traffy!" A young voice called out, stopping their conversation. It belonged to a small girl, who trotted up to the tattooed doctor with a smile on her face, "Have you come to play with us?"

"Aisa!" An adult female hissed, obviously uncomfortable with the child approaching Law. She quickly moved to scoop the girl up into her arms and bowed to Law, "My apologies, she doesn't understand the meaning of manners."

Trafalgar huffed and knelt down to their level, smiling...*almost nicely* to them as he ruffled the girl's hair, causing the elder to stiffen.

"I'm sorry, little one, but I have work to do, so I can't play today. Why don't you go ask one of your friends, hmmm?"

The girl nodded and wriggled out of the female's arms to go find someone else...Sabo assumed. He had yet to fully understand human behavior.

It didn't take long for the elder human to slink away, eyeing them warily as she followed the child back into the main area of the room.

"The children, at least most of them, don't know anything else." Law said, motioning for Sabo to follow him into a side office, which unsurprisingly was locked tightly and had to be opened with the doctor's key, "The adults are more wary as many were taken directly from the wastes."

Sabo hummed and took in the desk which housed papers and binders, much like the ones he'd already looked over.

"Do you ever have problems with rebellion?"

"Yes, though generally not with the children." Law mumbled while rummaging through the desk, "The adults know what will happen if they disobey, so they keep the younger ones in line. Incidentally, you asked about designations earlier...we don't give new names to those born here. They are named by their mothers, a privilege we allow to give them a sense of autonomy."

'Truly fascinating...' Sabo thought, looking out the window to where the children frolicked. They appeared happy, at least under the careful watch of their mothers. He imagined that would change once they were old enough to give blood.

"At what age do you transfer them to the stables? Back home, they were given to us at twelve." Law scoffed, angrily scribbling his signature down a few documents.

"That's ridiculous...*twelve*." He murmured under his breath, "Obviously, you purebloods have no knowledge of human growth. According to my calculations, and research, humans should not be eligible to give blood until they're *at least* sixteen. Here, we transfer them at sixteen, but sometimes we don't start harvesting until seventeen or eighteen."

"Really?" Sabo asked, careful with his words as this seemed like a touchy subject for the other vampire, "Forgive me, but humans have short life spans, correct? So, shouldn't we start early-"

"-and kill them?" Law finished, eyes narrow, "No. It's much too easy to accidentally drain a youngling dry. They are our precious food source, Sabo-ya...I recommend you consider the sanctity of their lives for a moment."

Sabo found the statement a bit hypocritical as he knew for a fact that Trafalgar had "put down" quite a few humans just in the last few days. But, before he could say anything, the elder vampire stood and walked to the window, a distant look in his eyes.

"I know what you're thinking, but everything I do is for the survival of our citadel, our home. Some humans simply cannot be tamed..." He said through gritted teeth, eyes full of...regret? "Despite my best efforts, not all of them can be saved; and sometimes, *death* is a mercy."

Sabo was taken aback by the elder vampire's vulnerability. He gave off an air of confidence and of one who had no problem taking lives, but that couldn't be the complete truth, not with

how he appeared now. Taking a breath, the blonde smiled softly.

"You carry a heavy burden...these children are lucky to have you looking out for them."

"So you say." Law said, turning around, "Though now they have you as well, so live up to their expectations."

Sabo nodded, wanting but denying the urge to question Trafalgar more. He obviously had quite the past and genuinely cared about the humans held in the citadel. Unfortunately, it wasn't his place to ask, not yet.

---

As the day went on, Sabo decided that Law was...confusing.

While he certainly had a heart for the humans in his care, especially the younglings, he had a very sadistic side that came out when dealing with a difficult captive human. Law wasn't afraid to break bones and force their submission.

Though, once they were submissive enough for his liking, Law would mellow significantly. When Sabo asked him about it, the doctor simply stated that some humans required a heavy hand.

'Something tells me he has a soft spot for kids.' The pureblood mused, walking next to the tattooed doctor. Law was showing him various charts in the stables and would soon demonstrate how they collected blood.

"Ah, here you are." Trafalgar said with a sneer while grabbing his keys. Peeking around the vampire, Sabo blinked at a terrified looking human. He was tall, broad, and blonde, which might've been intimidating to smaller members of his species, if not for his black and blue face. The man looked to have been beaten.

Glancing down to the chart, he noted his designation was "Hyena."

"N-No, don't you dare touch me!"

Law smirked and opened the door, letting the human out. The first thing he did was swing at them, though it wasn't very effective. It was simple for the doctor to twist his arm behind his back.

"Come, Sabo-ya, it's time I showed you how blood collection works."

The pureblood followed Law back into the citadel, glancing sideways at the humans left behind. Some appeared resigned while others trembled in the corner of their pen.

'This is Stable C, so a newcomer then?'

The tattooed vampire led them into a side door not far from the stables. Inside were multiple rooms, all with chairs and medical equipment. Law wasted no time in strapping the flailing human down to the metal chair, thick bands holding his wrists and ankles tightly.

Ignoring the human who continued to scream obscenities, Law took a device Sabo recognized as a scanner and ran it over the man's right arm until it beeped. Looking to the nearby computer screen, Sabo saw the human's tracking number appeared along with his blood type.

"We generally take blood from eligible humans every four weeks, depending on their health." Law explained while pulling gloves on and cleaning a needle.

"What? I thought humans regenerate blood, so why not take more?"

"Because they need time to recuperate." The vampire continued, pausing a moment to attach the needle and machinery to the human's neck, causing him to cry out (understandably considering the size of the needle), "When we collect their blood, we are taking somewhere between ten and fifteen percent of their blood volume. Clinically, it takes approximately fifty-six days to completely replace their lost red blood cells, and that's when we only take ten percent. We're already pushing it with only four weeks if we want our humans to remain healthy, but we do what we must to feed the citadel."

Sabo had no idea the human anatomy was so complicated. Back home, they just took as much as they wanted, whenever they wanted. No wonder so many of them died.

"Naturally, the time can vary depending on their age, sex, and body type, but fifty-six days is about standard. If they show signs of illness or a severe lack of iron, we wait a few more weeks, just to be safe. Anyway, come look here." Law said, motioning for Sabo to come closer and look at the needle, already draining the human's blood, "Note the placement... you need to be very careful with this vein. If the flow isn't staunched properly, they'll bleed out in minutes."

As the human's blood was taken, Law peppered him with facts he didn't know, like why they usually took from veins instead of arteries (apparently they were larger and held more blood)...along with the fact that venous pressure is lower so there is less chance of blood seeping out of the wound before it healed completely.

Needless to say, Sabo was completely and utterly fascinated.

Once the bag was full, Law expertly removed the needle and staunched the blood flow with a bandage, one that had built in antibiotics and other medicine to help the wound heal quickly.

"Now, I took a little more than normal with him, mostly because Haruta-ya demanded it." Law huffed, removing his gloves, "This is the one who shot him in the gut."

"I see." Sabo whispered, looking over the dazed and definitely weakened human, "I thought for sure Lord Phoenix wanted him executed from the way he spoke yesterday."

"Yes...lucky for him, it was delayed until after you and the new Lord get settled in. So, for now, I take what blood I can."

Sabo swallowed nervously at Law's devilish sneer. The rumors about the Whitebeards being protective of each other to the point of violence was very true.



After taking the human back to his pen, Sabo figured they were done for the day considering the sun was setting, but Law didn't stop and led him down a path next to the bubbling stream. It was beautiful...a stark contrast to the desolate sand outside the walls.

"You have a lot to learn," Law said, breaking the silence, "but I like your tenacity. Just don't get overconfident...you and Eustass-ya have yet to gain the loyalty of our clan."

Sabo bowed deeply, causing his cravat to come undone.

"Thank you, I will take that to heart."

Law nodded, seemingly pleased with his response, before moving to return to the citadel.

"I recommend you check out the library, Sabo-ya. Master Whitebeard had quite the collection and that knowledge may help you understand why we do what we do. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have...*an obligation*."

Sabo smiled at Trafalgar's back, pleased with how the day had gone. Determined to succeed and outshine the doctor's expectations, the pureblood decided to swing by the cafeteria to... mingle, and maybe get a location on the library Law mentioned.

'...and get a kimono...they look sooo comfortable.'

---

Luffy's bottom lip trembled as his stomach growled *again*. Ace had only come back to his room once during the day, and unfortunately had only brought a sandwich. He was used to not eating much, but...he secretly hoped Ace would bring back more of the fluffy cakes.

Glancing out to the dark sky, Luffy wondered what the vampire was doing.

At first, exploring the room had been kind of exciting, but after hours of NOTHING, not even the puppy book could keep him entertained. The good news was that his legs were feeling better after getting so much rest...

Huffing, Luffy refocused on what he was doing, sewing. It hadn't been difficult to find his bag under Ace's bed (though he was disappointed to discover his knives were gone) and retrieve his self-made sewing kit.

'I suppose this could be a weapon...' He mused, looking over his bent and dull needle. No, that probably wouldn't go over very well. Vampires were too strong, especially in his still injured state.

Shifting his weight on Ace's bed so his back was resting against the headboard, Luffy concentrated on his stitching. With nothing else to do, the boy had unraveled some loose string from the vampire's rug and mindlessly made...whatever he was making with some extra fabric and whatever string was left in his bag. Maybe a tiny scarf? Or a headband? It was pretty ugly but gave him something to do.

Thirty more minutes passed and Luffy was falling asleep. Yawning, the boy cradled his unfinished "project" and scooted off the bed, deciding to wash his face, use the toilet (which

was a pretty awesome invention!) and go to sleep. Maybe Ace would wake him if he brought more food...

Drowsy, Luffy didn't notice his legs were tangled up in the throw blanket on Ace's bed until it was too late. Yelping, he fell towards the floor, hoping he would land on the rug and not the hard floor.

Surprisingly, he didn't even hit the floor, because someone caught him.

At first, he thought it was Ace, but something wasn't right. Tensing, Luffy's head shot up, taking in the dark hair and golden earrings. It was a vampire he'd never seen before. Had he come in through the window!?

Gasping, he tried to escape the tall vampire's grasp. Snorting, the stranger released him, but not his wrists, making it impossible for him to go anywhere (and causing his tiny scarf to flutter to the floor along with his needle).

"Ace-ya has really done it now." The vampire huffed, switching Luffy's wrists to his right hand before the boy could even react. He instinctively pulled back when the creature cupped his jaw and looked down at his face in interest. "What's so special about you I wonder..."

"Don't touch me-" Luffy growled, only to be cut off when the vampire's clawed hand moved from his chin to his mouth. He couldn't hold in a whimper of fear as his face was drawn close to the other's sharp fangs.

"Hush, we don't want to get Ace-ya into even more trouble, do we?" The creature chided, eyes dead serious, "Now...I'll need you to come with me and be *very* quiet."

---

Ace felt really bad. He'd intended on spending the majority of the day with Luffy, but something kept getting in his way! The morning had gone all right (except for the disastrous interview with Law and meeting the blonde noble again...), he was able to sneak back to his room with whatever he could scrounge up.

Unfortunately, after that, it was either "Ah, Ace, there's a meeting you need to go to *right* now" or "Hey, the new Lord wants all the scouts in the wastes for a special session of training".

While he had enjoyed the sparing in the sand, he wasn't pleased with the Lord's announcement. The ambitious pureblood intended to take a large group of their best out into the city and its outskirts for *two weeks*!

'What am I supposed to do with Lu?' Ace mused, finally reaching his room and fumbling for the key, 'He can't survive that long alone in here!' He probably shouldn't have shown the red-head his best form...maybe then he would've been allowed to stay behind.

The second he opened the door, Ace bristled. Something was off. Taking only seconds, he checked every room and every possible hiding place Lu could've thought of. Finding nothing.

Breathing heavily, the freckled vampire considered how the human could've escaped.

'On those legs, he couldn't have!'

That was when a flash of white caught his eye. Folded neatly on his bed was piece of paper. It was placed on top of a fabric...thing that still had Luffy's needle attached to it. Had the kid been making something to pass the time?

Swallowing nervously, Ace picked up the note.

In exact cursive, it read:

*We need to talk.*

*Come to my room.*

*TL*

'Law...' Ace snarled, crumpling the paper in his fist, 'If he's hurt Lu in any way, I'll kill him!'

## Chapter End Notes

\*insert evil laugh\* Don't you just love cliffhangers! Lol anyway, just wanted to say thanks to everyone who's given this story of mine a try, left kudos, or commented. It means a lot and is more motivating than you know! Thanks for your support and I'll see ya'll next time :)

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for a panic attack in this chapter.

Ace jogged through the long hallways of the citadel, quickly making his way to Law's room. As much as he wanted to sprint, he knew it would draw too much attention to himself, which was something he desperately needed to avoid.

Turning a corner and taking the eastern stairs up, Ace considered how Law had figured it out so quickly.

'...I bet it was the interview...' He mused, gritting his teeth in frustration. Hopefully, the doctor would listen to his reasoning and give Lu back without alerting Marco or the new Lord.

Finally, he arrived at Law's door, located on the third level, and wasted no time knocking vigorously.

"Come in, Ace-ya." Trafalgar called; voice muffled by the thick door. Entering quickly, Ace immediately glared at Law, who was sitting on the edge of his bed, eyes narrow. "Close and lock the door please."

As he clicked the lock into place, Ace scanned the large room for Luffy. Recognizing his searching gaze, Law stood up and moved away from the bed.

There, wrists cuffed to the leg of the bedframe, was his human. Luffy seemed okay, if a little scared. He was forced to sit on the floor with his hands secured above his head. Recognizing him, Luffy shook his wrists to show his displeasure, unable to speak because of a strip of fabric forced between his teeth.

"I took the liberty of re-placing his bandages." Law said smoothly, leaning back against the wall while Ace knelt before Luffy and checked him over. The freckled vampire took the boy's face in his hands and gently rubbed his cheeks, trying to assure him that he'd be okay now.

"Did he hurt you?" Ace whispered, receiving a head-shake from Luffy. Ruffling the boy's hair, he stood up and faced Law. "Well...what now?"

"What now?" Trafalgar huffed, stalking up to him, "Do you have any idea what you've done bringing him here!? You've broken one of the most foundational rules of the citadel!"

"I know what I did," Ace replied shortly, lips curling up into a snarl, "and I don't regret anything. Luffy's safe here with me."

Law sighed and buried his face in a tattooed hand.

"Honestly...you couldn't have chosen a worse time. Listen, Ace-ya, believe it or not, I'm on your side here." Trafalgar explained, moving closer, "I can see you have some sort of connection with this human, one you probably could've explained to Marco-ya had he still been in charge."

"Like hell!" Ace snapped, biting the inside of his cheek and drawing blood, "You know as well as I do that Marco only sees humans as food! H-He'd hurt Lu or-or try to eat him-" Law crossed his arms and pinned Ace in place with a scowl.

"Do you seriously think he'd harm someone you cared for?"

"I...I...but he's human-"

"I've known Marco-ya for a long time." Law stated while glancing down at Luffy. The poor kid's eyes were wide, and he shuffled in place nervously. "Considering how young this one is, I doubt he would've hurt him, especially since he's your sire."

"You really think so?" Ace whispered, "He... might've accepted Lu?"

"Perhaps, he's more agreeable than you might think."

Ace slumped to the floor next to Luffy and pulled at his hair. Maybe he should've gone through the proper channels with Luffy...but now it was too late. If only those damn purebloods hadn't come!

"What should I do?" Ace asked, voice quiet and unsure.

"Give him to me."

His head shot up and he snarled at Law. This vampire wanted to take Luffy from him!? No way in hell! The kid didn't seem too pleased with the idea either and made little noises of protest behind his gag. Trafalgar rolled his eyes.

"Calm down, Ace-ya, and let me explain my...proposition. Unless you *want* the boy to starve during the next two weeks?"

Ace flinched at the reminder. Law must've heard about the scouts' assignment to accompany the new Lord into the wastes. They were leaving tomorrow around noon, so he did need to figure something out for Lu, but he'd rather not leave him with Trafalgar.

"That depends on what you intend to do." He growled, standing up in front of Luffy, blocking Law's view.

"I will do what's best for the human," Trafalgar replied firmly, "and move him to the stables. I've already ascertained he's old enough." Ace immediately went to protest but was stopped by Law's raised hand.

"Listen, it will be difficult, but I can get the paperwork rung up tonight and have him in by morning. Sabo-ya hasn't looked over the charts for Stable G, so it shouldn't cause any suspicion, and he will be well taken care of."

Ace bit his lip and turned back to Luffy. The boy blinked up at him with big eyes, subtly shaking his head.

"This may be your only chance to do this." Trafalgar put in, moving to place a hand on his shoulder, "After today, Sabo-ya will have all of the charts memorized."

"Why...are you trying to help me?"

"Because I don't want to see an innocent child die." Law answered, lowering his hand, "Don't misunderstand, this is not me accepting your decision to break the rules, it's me protecting his life, and yours."

Ace had to admit; the offer was good. Luffy would be safe and cared for while he was gone. Unfortunately, it was also a very *permanent* solution. Kneeling down in front of his human, Ace pulled the gag down, so it fell around Luffy's neck.

The human was deathly pale.

"I don't want to!" The boy cried, bottom lip quivering, "I-It'll be small and cramped and-and-" Ace shushed Luffy, running a hand through his hair. The poor thing was shuddering in terror.

'That's right, he hates tight spaces.'

"J-Just let me go! I'll disappear and you'll never even know I was here!" Luffy suggested, peering up at Ace with wet, hopeful eyes.

"I'm afraid that's not possible." Law put in, making the human's face fall, "Even if we got you out of the citadel without anyone seeing, Eustass-ya intends to clear out all the human colonies in the area and take back the city. Frankly, you'd be dead or recaptured in a few weeks."

Luffy curled in on himself and started to shake. Ace immediately reached up and released the cuffs from the bed, allowing the boy's still bound hands to fall into his lap. Gently, the vampire collected the sobbing and borderline hyperventilating human in his lap, desperately shushing and trying to calm him down.

"I think he's having a panic attack." Law stated calmly, kneeling down next to him, "Give me his hands, I'll take the cuffs off."

As soon as the restraints and fabric around his neck had been removed, Ace carried Luffy to a nearby chair and gently lowered him onto the soft cushion. The boy's breathing was erratic, and he practically vibrated in fear. Ace stayed with him, whispering reassurances, while Law quickly prepared a glass of water and a wet cloth.

Ace didn't want to overwhelm Luffy with too much touch, so he simply rubbed a thumb into his hand. After about ten minutes, the boy started to calm down.

"Hey...you back with us, Lu?" Ace whispered, taking the glass of water from Law and handing it to the trembling boy. Luffy took a few long gulps before nodding and giving the glass back. Once the cup was safely on the nearby table, the freckled vampire wiped the kid's sweat away with the wet cloth.

"S-S-Sorry...I d-didn't mean to-"

"It's okay, it wasn't your fault." Ace replied, placing the cloth down alongside the cup.

"Luffy-ya, correct?" Law asked, in possibly the softest, most gentle tone he'd ever heard the vampire use. The human nodded while wiping at his eyes. "I can assure you that our stables are quite large and have an outdoor component to them as well. If you do feel claustrophobic, my team and I can remedy that, okay?"

The boy looked to Ace, eyes puffy and swollen.

"Do...do I have to?"

"I'm so sorry, Lu, but I think this is our best option right now..." Law closed his eyes and nodded, seemingly pleased with Ace's decision.

---

Luffy pulled at his new clothes, unsure with how he felt about them. The new vampire... Trall... Trafago... Torao-something, had gotten them for him after a quick shower in the creature's bathroom.

He now wore a slightly off-white shirt that was paired with equally white capris. The fabric was light and breathable, which was more than his homemade outfits offered, but it also marked him as livestock. Nothing more than a food source.

At least they let him keep his pendant, his important memento, and he didn't have to wear Ace's ugly shorts anymore (plus they actually fit him).

Huffing, Luffy ran a hand lightly over his left elbow and winced, the flesh already bruising from Torao taking blood.

"Hey...you okay?" Ace asked from where he sat on Luffy's right. Thankfully, he was no longer tethered to the bed post and simply sat in a chair, no restraints holding him down. The boy could only assume he was being treated with more care because of his...*episode*.

"I'm okay." Luffy answered quietly, moving his hand from his elbow when Ace gently pushed it away from the puncture, stopping him from picking at the still scabbing wound.

"That's good." The freckled vampire smiled, reaching to ruffle his hair. To Luffy, Ace was confusing. On one hand, he took good care of him and even showed genuine concern for his well-being, but also had no problem restraining him and keeping him in a cage, like a pet.

What was he supposed to think!? It was like Ace was projecting his jumbled emotions onto him and expecting him to respond in kind.

Because they were *connected* in some way...or something. Luffy didn't understand.

'Am I just a possession to him?' The boy mused, wrapping his arms around his thin waist. Shivering at the thought, Luffy turned his head to watch Torao on the other side of the room.

The older vampire had been looking into a microscope at what he assumed was his blood for quite a while now. Unlike Ace's room, Torao had some sort of lab in the corner of his suite and he was currently putting the machinery to work.

Suddenly, Torao straightened and walked back towards them, a strange look on his face.

"Is something wrong?" Ace asked, standing up to meet him.

"Possibly..." Torao mumbled before stopping in front of Luffy, "His blood is...different. The cellular structure is extremely dense."

"And that's a problem, why?"

"In layman's terms, Ace-ya, his blood is exceptionally pure." The vampire explained, "However, this purity gives it a potency that's on the verge of being toxic to our kind."

Luffy tilted his head at this information, curling up on his chair. Back then, when *that vampire* had him, he didn't mind his blood...

The boy shook his head, dismissing the upsetting thought.

"Is that why Lu's blood doesn't smell like anything? Not appetizing, I mean." Ace put in. Torao hummed.

"I'm not sure...I will make a note in his chart not to harvest his blood for the time being as I want to do more research before allowing anyone to drink from him. Hopefully no one will ask questions."

At that, Torao continued with his "preparations", taking body measurements and hair clippings. It was a long and arduous process, tiring Luffy out. Glancing out the window, he noted the darkness. They'd been awake for most of the night now.

"We're almost done, Luffy-ya." Torao reassured, making him pull back from his cold hands. The vampire made him nervous, for good reason. He didn't want to be fooled by his soft words and promises.

While he trusted Ace, somewhat (for mystery reasons...he wasn't really sure why), Torao was scary. The vampire was strong and hiding something...Luffy was sure of it.

"All that's left now is his tag."

Luffy froze at that. He...was going to be *tagged*?

Surprising himself, and the two vampires, Luffy leapt up and made for the door, desperate to get away. If he was tagged, all aspects of freedom he'd had would vanish. He'd be banned



from sanctuaries and un-marked humans would avoid him like the plague.

They would fear him, maybe even hate him. He'd heard stories of people killing those who were tagged to ensure their own safety from any vampires that might come looking for them.

It was like an invisible collar, chaining him to the vampires for the rest of his life.

Luffy didn't make it three steps before Ace caught him around the waist and held him tightly. Undeterred, he struggled violently, scratching at the vampire's arms and calling out loudly. He hadn't fought Ace's decision because he thought there would still be a chance for him to be free again, but this crushed that hope.

"A little help, Law!" Ace hissed, silencing Luffy with a hand over his mouth, "He's gonna wake up the whole wing!" The boy continued to thrash, kicking at Ace's legs with his bare feet, until a sharp prick in his neck startled him.

Almost immediately, a wave of exhaustion and numbness moved through his body, making him whimper at the feeling. He slumped backwards and was swung into Ace's arms where his head lulled against the vampire's chest.

"Sedative?"

"Just a bit, enough to keep him calm until we're done."

---

Ace gently cradled Luffy, shifting so his head was supported against his shoulder. The boy's eyes were glazed over from the sedative, a sharp contrast to his normally bright gaze.

"This...is probably related to his fear of enclosed spaces." Ace said, turning to Law, "He values his freedom above everything else."

"And yet, you still brought him here," Law answered darkly, disposing of the syringe, "where its either enslavement or death. Considering how fond you are of him, it's surprising." The younger could only shrug, thinking about what Luffy had told him about his past with vampires. There must be more to the story, continuing after his parents were killed.

"I can't explain it, I just want to protect him, more than anything." Ace whispered, eyes flicking up to meet Law's intense gaze, "Can we finish? He can barely keep his eyes open."

"Very well..." The older vampire relented, "but first, I want you to promise me something, Ace-ya."

"What?"

"When you return from the expedition, inform your sire of this boy's existence." Ace's eyes narrowed at the request, subconsciously tightening his hold on Luffy.

"I...I...I'm not sure I can-"

"That is my condition for helping you keep him alive."

Wanting nothing more than to ensure Luffy's health and safety, Ace nodded. He would deal with that in two weeks, when he returned to the citadel. After he agreed, Law immediately went to work on the tag, a small chip that would be inserted into Luffy's right forearm.

All of the boy's physical and general information was stored on the chip along with a tracking beacon that would relay his location and vital signs at all times. Currently, the tag was connected to Law's computer, and he typed quickly, inserting the required notes.

The elder vampire finished quickly and removed the chip from the computer so he could slot it into a handheld machine that would inject it into the tissue of Luffy's arm. The tag would be placed directly between major arteries, making it very difficult to remove without the assistance of a skilled doctor.

The whole process only took a few minutes.

Ace delicately ran a thumb over the now slightly raised skin, stopping when Luffy flinched and whined at the contact.

"I'm sorry...you deserve better than this." He whispered, cuddling the boy closer. As he did so, Luffy's pendant fell out of the confines of his shirt. Almost in reverence, Ace cupped his fingers around it, feeling the smooth surface of the red orb.

Suddenly, a sharp pain shot through his head, almost making him drop Luffy. He could just barely hear Law calling his name, but his vision was filled with vaguely familiar images.

First was one he'd seen before, a younger version of himself proudly receiving a similar pendant to Luffy's, though his was white.

*"You are a... now, Ace." A voice said, prompting small-Ace to nod, "Though young, your abilities will soon surpass even my own. Use them to protect...and slay-"*

The freckled vampire shook his head, frustrated he couldn't hear or understand all of what he was seeing. The image shifted, revealing a woman whose face was obscured and unrecognizable. She gently ran a hand down his cheek and smiled before reaching down to cup her belly.

"Who...?" He tried to ask, but his hand went right through her. The environment shifted again to the wastes, desert all around. This time, Ace saw himself, but as a man.

Vision-Ace was bleeding profusely and scrambled away from...something, clutching the pendant around his neck. It was unclear who he was fleeing, but whoever it was, they were strong.

*I CAN'T DIE HERE.*

Ace grabbed his head as a voice, his own, he realized, reverberated through the air. Were these his thoughts...his memories?

*MOM...MUST RETURN...BABY...*

The freckled vampire cried out as the images stopped, breathing heavily. In front of him, Law had him by the shoulders.

"Ace-ya, are you alright!?"

"Y-Yeah." He replied, looking down to Luffy who was still limp in his arms. His eyes widened as he realized his claws had extended and were digging into the small human's limbs.

"What happened?" Law asked while he slowly willed his nails to retract.

"Another vision...worst one yet." What did they all mean? Were his memories truly coming back?

"I see. Did this vision reveal anything of importance to you?"

"I couldn't really understand what was happening but, I think I saw my parents..." Ace whispered, readjusted himself on the chair. Law hummed.

"Interesting...perhaps your memories are returning..." The doctor mumbled, taking out his note pad and jotting something down, "Are you currently in any pain?"

Law continued to question him for about thirty minutes. Ace tried to answer as best he could, but the images were so jumbled, it was difficult to explain, let alone understand. As the interview came to an end, Luffy groaned in his lap, eyes blinking.

"The sedative is starting to wear off. It's about time to bring him to Stable G." Law stated, standing up to straighten his kimono, "You should return to your room, Ace-ya, I'll take it from here."

"But-"

"He'll be fine. Here's the pen number so you can visit him tomorrow and when you return." Law said while handing him a slip of paper, "You have a long mission ahead of you, so get some sleep. Luffy-ya is in good hands."

Reluctantly, Ace stood and transferred Luffy into Law's arms. The boy, now slightly more awake, struggled weakly and reached for him. It took all his self-control not to wrench the human out of the older vampire's arms.

"Shhh...it's okay Lu." He soothed, carding a hand through Luffy's scruffy hair, "I'll come see you in the morning before I leave, okay?" The human whined and shakily grabbed his hand before whispering,

"M-Mom...don't go..."

Both Ace and Law started at that, glancing to one another in shock.

"I 'don wanna be...alone..."

The freckled vampire went to say something but was stopped by a shake of Law's head.

"It's the drugs, he's out of it." Ace nodded, backing away slowly with a small frown creasing his brows. Did he really remind him of his mother? Exiting Law's room, Luffy's voice the previous day filled his head. That moment when he'd started calling the boy 'Lu'.

*"I-Is that not good? I'm sorry, please don't cry!"*

*"N-No, it's just-" Luffy sobbed, "That's what my mom used to call me."*

---

Once Ace was gone, Law gently lowered Luffy down onto the couch to give him some time to come back to his senses. As he hovered over the boy, he took the red pendant in his hands and looked it over for moment before tucking it back into the confines of Luffy's shirt.

It was obvious Ace had no idea what it symbolized, but Law knew. He also now understood why Luffy was having such an effect on the younger vampire, though he wanted to do some more tests on the boy...to be sure. There could be other factors to consider.

Walking over to the wall next to his bed, Law pressed lightly on a panel, causing it to pop open. He hadn't opened it in years...not since Master Whitebeard began his hibernation. Reaching inside, Law pulled out a small metal box.

Gently, so as to not damage the ancient thing, Law ran his fingers along the chain that lay on the padded innards of the box and lifted up a necklace, a pitch black bead pendant swinging from it.

'Perhaps it is as they say...' He mused, brushing a fingertip over the pendant, causing the lone letter to illuminate, *'Blood calls out to blood.'*

Law held onto the necklace, reminiscing, until Luffy sat up, holding his head.

It was time to go.

---

Luffy stumbled through the winding corridors, struggling to keep up with Torao who had a firm grip on his upper arm. Whatever the vampire had given him was wearing off, but a film of exhaustion still held his mind and his legs ached with every jarring step.

He tried to pay attention to where they were going, but there were just too many turns and staircases. Eventually, Torao dragged him outside of the main complex, into the yard. Luffy's eyes widened at the beauty, green trees and bubbling streams illuminated by lamps.

Stars twinkled up above, and hardly anyone was around except for guards patrolling the exterior wall. Probably because it was the middle of the night...or early morning? Luffy wasn't sure. Torao led him to the left of the main entrance, where a large building stood, metal fences standing tall in oval shapes around it.

Luffy swallowed nervously.

Torao fished out a key and unlocked the front entrance, subsequently pulling it open.

"Cap? Is that you?" A voice called, startling Luffy. It was a vampire in a jump suit, a strange hat obscuring his face, "What're you doing out at this time of night?"

"Shachi-ya." Torao greeted, turning to face the newcomer and tugging Luffy along with him, "I'm stabling this human; he's been in solitary for a few days now."

"Oh really? Wait..." The vampire trailed off, looking between Luffy and Torao, "Is this another one of your research projects?"

"...possibly..."

Luffy shuffled uncomfortably as the new vampire chided Torao for "overworking himself" and "never telling them anything". Soon he was tugged along into the building, the newcomer trotting behind them.

They passed cage after cage, most of their inhabitants asleep, but some groggily looked up to watch them pass. Torao stopped at the last pen and instructed his subordinate to go get a bed set from the supply closet. Once the other was out of ear shot, the vampire turned his piercing eyes to Luffy.

"I'll be checking on you regularly, as will Ace-ya I imagine...once he returns. For now, do your best not to attract any unwanted attention."

Luffy mustered what energy he could and glared up at Torao, making the vampire smirk.

"Feisty aren't you...that's good." He said before grabbing his shoulders and spinning him to face the cage. The vampire's breath tickled his ear as he whispered, "Trust me, we're your allies, Luffy-ya. If the purebloods find out about your...*questionable* bloodline, they'll slaughter you on the spot."

The boy's breath hitched as Torao tapped his shirt, right where his pendant was hidden.

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. After all..." He trailed off and dangled something in front of Luffy's face. When his eyes adjusted to the object, they widened in shock.

'T-There's no way...he can't be...?'

"...we have something in common. Perhaps sometime soon, you'll tell me which tribe you're from."

Luffy gulped and stared back at the vampire, watching him put the bead pendant away. Other than his parents, he'd never met another person like him, and he certainly never expected to find one a vampire...how was that possible?

Seconds later, Torao's subordinate returned with a bundle of blankets and a pillow, which was placed in Luffy's arms as he was pushed into the now open cell. Barely managing to catch himself, the boy growled through the bars at the two vampires.

"Behave, little one." Torao teased, locking him in before leading his subordinate away, whispering something in the other's ear. Luffy assumed they were talking about him as the smaller nodded and glanced back at him.

Sighing, he turned to examine the inside of his *temporary* new home. It was quite spacious (which he was very grateful for), with a loft accessible by a metal ladder and ropes hanging from the ceiling. There wasn't much furniture, just a few cushions and some squishy-looking chair things to compliment the padded floor. Currently, the door leading to the outside portion of the pen was closed half-way, allowing some moonlight to filter in.

It was dark, so it was difficult to see, but there were three other bodies in the cell. One was snoring in the back corner near the door while another slept silently on a bed of cushions, blanket pulled up to their chin. The third was sitting up, seemingly asleep against the left wall.

Unsure of what to do, Luffy slowly tip-toed into the pen.

"Oi." A deep voice rasped, stopping him in his tracks, "What're you doing?" It was the one sitting up.

"I...I don't know, really." Luffy whispered, hugging his bundle close, "Was gonna find a place to sleep...I guess."

"Eh...?" The man replied, standing up and moving closer. As he approached and entered the lighter portion of the cell, Luffy could just make out fierce eyes and a broad chest. "Pretty weird for those bastards to throw a kid in here in the middle of the night..."

Luffy could only shrug, eyelids threatening to fall over his exhausted eyes. The tension from the past few hours was draining away and all he wanted to do was sleep. The taller man seemed to catch this and motioned towards the loft with his head.

"You can sleep up there, we'll talk in the morning."

Luffy nodded and padded past the man towards the ladder. He somehow managed to pull himself up while keeping hold of his blanket and pillow. As he made himself a little bed, Luffy peeked over the railing to where the man had gone back to leaning against the wall.

"Um...thanks."

"Sure, kid."

"Luffy." He whispered back, pouting slightly in the dark, "Not kid." The man chuckled at that and smirked up at him, eyes barely visible in the dark.

"Zoro. Now quit yapping and sleep."

Luffy smiled silently to himself as Zoro (definitely his new friend) settled on the lower level. Turning his attention back to his make-shift bed, the boy situated himself under the blankets, surprisingly comfortable considering the circumstances.

He fell asleep in seconds.

## Chapter 8

Luffy woke to the sound of whispered voices and sunlight shining on him, warming his make-shift bed. Lethargically opening his eyes, he could barely make out three forms clustered together below him.

"Why would they bring someone in the middle of the night?"

"How should I know! It's not like they tell us anything..."

"D-D-Do you think he's dangerous?"

The boy scooted to the edge of the loft and looked over his new cell mates, now visible in the morning light. He recognized Zoro immediately, his broad build and gruff voice giving him away. The man appeared a few years older than him had *green* hair, which Luffy decided was super cool.

The second human was younger and scrawnier with an abnormally long nose. He seemed scared and kept pointing up in Luffy's general direction. Lastly, was a girl. She was young, probably around his age, with short orange hair and a piercing voice.

All three of them wore the same clothes Luffy did, complete with no shoes. Though, Zoro had a weird metal band around his neck.

'Wonder what that's for?' The boy thought, sitting up. As he straightened his cell mates immediately looked up at him. Thankfully, Zoro greeted him with a nod.

"Morning, Luffy."

"...hi..." He returned quietly, slowly climbing down the ladder and wincing as his legs protested. Somewhat unsure, Luffy padded up to the group and wrung his hands together. Almost immediately, the girl stuck a finger in his face.

"So, what's your story? Why were you thrown in here in the middle of the night?"

"Y-Yeah!" The other kid supported (from behind Zoro), "Are you a spy or something!?"

"Spy?" Luffy questioned, tilting his head. Before he could answer, Zoro wacked the two on the head.

"Oi, leave him alone, we've all got stories. Luffy, this is Nami and Usopp. Looks like we'll be living together for the time being."

"Nice to meet you." Luffy mumbled, cracking a smile. It felt nice...comfortable even, to finally be around humans instead of vampires. After saying a brief hello, Nami and Usopp exited out the back door.



Luffy shuffled over to peek through the opening, hitting his head on one of the ropes hanging from the ceiling in the process.

"Ne, Zoro, what're these for?"

"Whatever you want really..." The older man answered, grabbing two and pulling himself up off the floor, "I've been using them to work out. We figure the vampires want to encourage 'healthy living' or some crap like that."

Luffy awed at Zoro's strength, wishing he could bulk up like that. He was by no means weak (excluding the unnatural power of vampires) but couldn't seem to build up large muscles... just lean ones. When Zoro dropped to the carpeted floor, he turned back to Luffy.

"They'll be bringing food soon. If you're thirsty, there's a fountain outside and a small bathroom behind that panel over there."

"You sure know a lot..." Luffy said, salivating slightly at the thought of food, "How long have you guys been here?"

"Not long...about two months." Zoro replied, crossing his arms, "What about you? Your tag looks brand new...were you captured during the raid a few days ago?"

Luffy bit his lip and clutched his forearm. He was nothing more than a caged animal now...

Zoro brought him out of his thoughts by placing a large hand on his head.

"Don't worry about it."

Looking up at his new friend, Luffy smiled softly. Zoro really was the best...and he'd only known him for like a few hours!

"Oi, you guys gotta see this!" Usopp called from outside, "Something's going on!"

Scurrying after Zoro, Luffy blinked as bright sunlight blurred his vision. The outdoor portion of the pen was completely enclosed by a metal fence that curved at the top. There was also a small patio and soft grass that felt wonderful on his bare feet. Interestingly enough, they were also provided with some hammocks and cushions.

They were given quite a lot for being mere livestock...

Gathering his thoughts, Luffy trotted over to the other three who were gathered at the edge of their paddock. Squeezing beside Zoro, his eyes widened.

Their stable (G...if he remembered correctly) was situated towards the front gate of the citadel. He'd only seen the inside of the vampire stronghold and a brief glance when brought out by Torao, but he was certain there hadn't been a massive gathering of vampires in full battle gear there a few hours ago. Scanning the group, he remembered what Ace and Torao had talked about.

"They're leaving to scout the wastes." He whispered, turning the heads of his cell mates.

"How do you know that?" Zoro asked with narrowed eyes.

"I...I overheard it." Luffy huffed, scratching at his tag, "Let's just say I've spent the last few days in close contact with a vampire and it...um..." He shivered, remembering the tiny closet and being taken away to Torao's room.

"You...you weren't brought here by normal means, were you?"

"No, not exactly."

Suddenly, Luffy found himself explaining his circumstances to complete strangers. He told them how he'd been kidnapped by Ace and the vampire's strange obsession with him. Torao had warned him to keep a low profile, but these were humans, not vampires. What was the harm in it?

"He kept you in his bedroom, chained up!?" Nami hissed, immediately coming to hug him, "That's sick!" Luffy wasn't sure why being in Ace's room would make him ill, but he gratefully returned the hug anyway.

"It's not uncommon for vampires to have obsessions." Zoro growled, "You probably have the same blood type as him or something."

"Ne, doesn't 'Torao' sound familiar?" Usopp put in, still keeping a wary eye on the growing horde a distance away, "Wait...you don't mean Trafalgar Law do you!?" Luffy nodded, leaning into Nami's touch as she scratched at his scalp soothingly.

"Yeah, Torao. He discovered Ace was hiding me and is the one who put me out here." At the name, all three of his new friends scowled.

"That guy sucks, always treating us like cattle!"

Luffy shrugged, not sure about the vampire himself. Torao was definitely scary and strong, but he was also kin (apparently)...so maybe he really was an ally? He couldn't be sure. At the thought, Luffy grabbed his shirt where his pendant was hidden, recalling what his father told him a long time ago.

*"Just as not all vampires are bad, not all humans are good. Keep our secret until you're certain of their character. Otherwise, they will try to use you for their own gain."*

'I can't tell them about this, not yet.'

"Oi, they're coming." Zoro said with a smirk, making Nami sigh.

"You don't have to do this every time you know...one of these days they really will just kill you." Confused, Luffy peered out of the fence and watched a group of vampires dressed in familiar jump suits unlock and enter the stable. Weren't those Torao's subordinates? Did that mean it was time for food?

He went to follow Zoro back into the stable but was stopped by Nami.

"Trust me, you probably want to wait a few minutes."

Confused, Luffy waited alongside Usopp who seemed equally exacerbated and nervous. What was Zoro going to do? His question was answered when yelling and cries came from the inside. Immediately concerned for his new friend, Luffy pushed past Nami and rushed back indoors, making his legs ache in the process.

He didn't know what to expect, but it certainly wasn't Zoro fighting against five armed vampires.

"How long are you going to do this, Marimo!?" One of them yelled, barely avoiding a punch from Zoro.

"That's not my name!" The green-haired man yelled, nailing another one in the gut. Luffy gaped, severely impressed and concerned at the same time. Just as he thought Zoro might injure another one, he screamed, grasping at his neck.

Luffy stared in horror as the metal band electrocuted Zoro.

"Enough!" A deep voice bellowed. Luffy gulped as a massive vampire dipped into their cell and held a remote up to Zoro, "I don't know why Captain insists on keeping you alive after all the trouble you cause..."

Soon, Nami and Usopp were next to him looking both tired and frustrated as they watched Zoro gasp for breath on the floor.

"Mikan, Pachinko, and," The large vampire took a chart offered him, "Luffy, the new one..." A smaller guard, one Luffy recognized from last night, whispered something into the other's ear, making him nod.

"Take Marimo while he's stunned, we need to harvest his blood this week anyway."

Luffy instinctively stepped forward as the vampires started to drag Zoro away, wanting to do something. His movement drew the attention of the large one.

"Don't even think about it."

They had a brief stare down until Usopp put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head solemnly, prompting Luffy to shuffle backwards and lower his gaze.

"Good...let's go, we've got others to deal with."

The vampires left a few trays of food just on the inside of the cell door before locking it behind them. While Usopp went to collect the food, Nami sighed.

"Zoro's been doing that since we were thrown in here. For whatever reason, the head-honcho wants to keep him alive despite everything, but they locked that collar around his neck to make him easier to handle." Nami ran a hand through her hair, "The idiot's determined to fight back...it's admirable, but also stupid."

Luffy frowned thinking about how long Zoro had been resisting, getting electrocuted every day...

"Why does he do it?"

"We were all captured at the same time." Nami explained with a huff, sitting down on the floor in front of the food. When Usopp plunked down next to her, Luffy quickly joined them. "Let's just say the group we're a part of tries to fight against the vampire's reign, but so far we're not doing so well..."

Usopp shoved a roll into his mouth and tried to add something but it came out a garbled mess until Nami passed him a cup of water.

"We tried to ambush a group of vampires but were overpowered." Usopp finally managed, "As for Zoro, he says he's looking for someone that was taken by vampires a long time ago."

"Who?" Luffy asked, gingerly bringing a piece of fruit up to his nose to smell its sweetness.

"His sister, Kuina." Nami replied, eyes downcast, "But she's been gone for so long...honestly, I'm not sure she's still alive."

They continued to eat in silence, the only noise coming from other pens and the vampires outside. Luffy felt like he understood Zoro's zealousness a little more, especially since he'd lost family members himself.

---

Ace quickly jogged through the hallways while he finished buckling his knife to his belt. After leaving Law's room, he'd tried to sleep, but simply couldn't...not when Lu was probably scared to death.

'I've got some time before we leave...I'll go see how he's doing.'

Turning the corner, Ace ran straight into someone.

"Ace, yoi. What's the rush? Worried you'll be late?" Marco teased, cracking a smile. Swallowing, Ace returned his sire's grin, albeit a shaky one.

"Something like that...just wanted to make sure I got breakfast before we left." As he replied, Ace clenched and unclenched his sweaty hands. Of all the people to run into...especially after Law's ultimatum.

*"When you return from the expedition, inform your sire of this boy's existence."*

"Is something wrong? You're acting strange, yoi."

"N-No, I'm just...nervous." He stuttered, "This is a big operation and our leader is someone we hardly know, or trust." Marco huffed and put a hand on Ace's shoulder.

"I know it's different, and I'm thankful all of you have worked hard to accept these changes, yoi."

Ace straightened at the compliment, unconsciously enjoying praise from his sire. That is, until he remembered why he was in a hurry.

"Thank you, Marco, for your kind words, but I actually have to go and finish my preparations. See you when I get back?" The older vampire nodded.

"Of course, yoi. Don't forget I will need to renew your mark as soon as you return."

Nodding, Ace trotted past his sire and exhaled deeply once he exited into the yard. At least that had gone better than his interview with Law. Purposefully skirting around the edges of the grassy courtyard, Ace slipped into the stable.

Thankfully, most of the keepers were gone, having just fed their charges. Remembering the pen number, Ace jogged past each cell, checking the identification numbers carefully. Finally, he arrived at his destination, the last one. The back door was right next the pen, giving him an easy escape route.

Peeking inside, he saw Luffy sitting with two other humans eating what must be their breakfast.

"Lu!" He whispered, kneeling down and grasping the bars. Almost immediately, the boy turned around and met his gaze, eyes wide.

"A-Ace?"

The vampire exhaled in relief, grateful his human appeared physically fine. Law kept his promise. Turning his head to check for prying eyes, Ace beckoned for the kid to come closer. Unsurprisingly, the other humans began to protest and even tried to pull Luffy away from him.

However, before he could get angry, Luffy gently broke free of their protective arms and padded over to him.

"Hey...you okay here? In the stables I mean." Ace probed quietly as Luffy lowered himself down onto his knees. The boy shrugged and briefly glanced back to the other two humans who were watching from the back of the pen.

"It's okay, still a cage though."

"I know, and I'm sorry about that." He apologized, reaching through the bars to pet through Luffy's hair, "When I get back, I'll try to think of something else, but for the time being-"

"Keep a low profile." Luffy interrupted, pulling Ace's hand away from his head, "Torao told me the same thing." The vampire frowned, a little hurt the boy was shying away from him, but it was understandable.

"Listen, I know how you must feel about me, but all I want is to keep you safe...you know that right?" The boy chewed on the inside of cheek and nodded, making Ace smile again.

"Good. I'll see you in two weeks then."

Taking Luffy by surprise (if his stiff body was any indication), he reached the bars and hugged him. Not wanting to dawdle for too long, Ace quickly released him, but not before ruffling his hair playfully.

"Bye, Lu. I promise things will be better when I get back."

---

Luffy let out a sigh of relief when Ace left, still surprised by the sudden hug. The vampire seemed...genuine, but it was all so *complicated*. Maybe if he could figure out why Ace cared about him so much, some of his confusion would go away.

"Are you nuts!?" Usopp hissed, rushing up to him, "Wasn't that the vampire who kept you locked up in his room!"

"Yeah, Ace."

"He didn't hurt you, did he?" Nami questioned while grabbing Luffy's face and looking him over with concern.

"No...just startled me."

As his two new friends lectured him, Luffy shifted from his knees to his rear, crossing his legs in front of him. No matter what Nami and Usopp said, he knew Ace wouldn't hurt him. When he didn't respond, his cell mates retreated back to the corner of the pen, whispering about hypnosis and other stuff.

Just as Luffy was about to get up, a shadow fell over him.

Instinctively, he looked up and locked eyes with an unfamiliar vampire. The creature was blonde with scars running down one side of his face and wore a deep blue robe, similar to the one Torao had been wearing the night before.

The vampire didn't say anything and simply looked Luffy over, eyes inquisitive and searching. Not daring to move, the boy held his gaze steady, unsure what the being wanted. When the vampire broke eye contact, Luffy deflated, like a weight had been removed from his body.

The blonde was now looking out the door, where Ace had just exited.

"How curious..." The vampire whispered before pulling out a chart, one Luffy had to assume was his. After looking it over for a few seconds, he returned the chart to its place and locked eyes with him again. This time, they glowed an ominous scarlet, making Luffy's breath hitch.

*"Stand up and come out here, human."*

The command hit him like a wave, making him stand up almost instantly. He could hear Nami and Usopp gasp from behind him but was grateful they didn't try to help.

Whoever this vampire was, he was more powerful than Ace.

Shuddering with every step, Luffy moved to the door that the creature had unlocked and stepped out onto the cold stone floor.

*"Good, now hold still please."*

Luffy could do nothing as the vampire put his hands around his neck and palpated the sensitive skin. Was he checking for bite marks? Held in place as he was, he prayed the creature would miss his necklace. Luffy's heart raced as the blonde sniffed him, sharp fangs dangerously close to a major artery.

"Lord Second? What're you doing?" A voice interrupted, making the vampire drop his hands. Glancing to the left, Luffy recognized Torao's subordinate...the guy with the funny hat.

"Just checking something." The blonde vampire replied, eyes returning to their normal color. Luffy's legs buckled once he was freed, and he would've collapsed into a heap on the floor had the creature not caught him and sat him up against the bars of his pen. "My apologies, little lamb...are you-"

"Here, allow me." The smaller vampire cut in, quickly checking Luffy's vitals, "He's okay, just knocked the breath out of him, I think. Damn, you purebloods have got some kick to your abilities!"

As the blonde laughed, Luffy's body went completely still. *This* was a pureblood!? If he discovered him-

"Hey, hey, easy little guy..." The smaller vampire soothed, reaching a gloved hand out to him. Luffy swallowed and tried to get his breathing under control. The last thing he needed was the pureblood putting his hands on him again.

Surprisingly, the blonde seemed genuinely concerned, a look that reminded him a little bit of Ace.

"Lord Second, would you open the door again? I'm gonna get him back inside."

Luffy grunted as he was pulled to his feet and led back into the pen, where he was immediately met by Nami and Usopp. Suddenly exhausted, he went limp in their comforting arms.

"I'll check up on him later."

"Thank you, Mr. Shachi, I appreciate it." The pureblood replied, glancing briefly to Luffy, "Unfortunately, I need to go see Kidd off...apologies for the inconvenience."

"Aye, aye, don't worry about it, it's my job after all."

Shuddering slightly, Luffy didn't resist as Nami sat them down and allowed his head to rest in her lap. He closed his eyes, enjoying the comfort that was her thin fingers carding through his hair.

"It's okay...just breathe..."

Usopp sat down with them and began to regale him with stories, further helping him calm down. Purebloods were scary.

---

Making his way out to the large group of vampires, Sabo considered what he'd seen in the stable. No matter how he re-played it in his mind, it had appeared that Ace was drinking from that young human. Why else would he be pulling him up against the bars?

'...but there were no puncture marks...so why...?' Sabo huffed, stopping to straighten his kimono. 'This is what I get for being proactive.'

He didn't particularly want to involve himself in the private lives of his new subordinates, but something wasn't quite right. For starters, while Trafalgar had been out doing whatever he was doing the evening before, Sabo took it upon himself to memorize the rest of the charts and documentation on the humans.

And, just now, he'd realized that the young human "Luffy" hadn't been in Stable G's files the night before. But, according to Trafalgar's personal note (in the chart that seemingly appeared out of nowhere), the boy had been in his care in solitary confinement due to a possible blood disorder.

So why hadn't the human's chart been in the binder? And what was Ace doing with him?

"Sabo!" A voice called, bringing him back to reality. Kidd was dressed in his battle attire and armed to the teeth, much like the other residents of Moby Dick. Among them was Ace, who was chatting with one of the older vampires on the other side of the yard.

"You seem happy." Sabo teased, smirking at his old friend.

"Naturally. This is the first step to my dream after all." Kidd said with a smirk, "Plus, it's bound to make an impact on the council. Oh yeah, Killer showed up this morning, finally."

Sabo hummed and scanned the crowd for the long haired vampire, finding him bowing before Lord Phoenix on the front steps. Killer was practically a brother to Kidd and followed him everywhere. Unfortunately, it had taken him a bit longer to join them, hence why he was a few days late.

"Will he be accompanying you?"

"Yeah. It's not that I don't trust the others, but...ya know." Sabo nodded, understanding completely. It had become very clear to the both of them since their arrival that the entire citadel was unashamedly loyal to Whitebeard and Lord Phoenix. "Take care of the citadel for me while I'm gone."

Sabo nodded and waved as Kidd turned and rallied his forces, Killer appearing at his side seconds later. They made quite a sight...nearly thirty warriors and scouts battle ready and prepared to go out into the wastes. No vehicles or transportation since the mission was supposed to be "stealthy".



Hopefully, they wouldn't cause any trouble with the surrounding citadels. From what he'd learned, not all of them were particularly friendly towards the Moby Dick.

When the front gate closed behind them, Sabo released a breath. As of now, he was in charge...a strange feeling. Turning around, a flash of white caught his eye.

It was the young human, now in the outdoor portion of the stable. He was accompanied by the other two humans who were gesturing at a hammock excitedly, trying to cheer him up perhaps? Something was going on, and it seemed to be connected to that boy.

Just before he made to re-enter the main building, something glinted off the kid's chest, a brilliant red color. It was only there for a second before it was gone. Blinking in confusion, he focused on the boy again, but could see nothing out of the ordinary. Sabo remembered a chain of some kind around the human's neck...jewelry maybe?

'Yet another undocumented mystery.'

He was tempted to question Law about it, but if the doctor was in on...*whatever was going on*, that wouldn't be a good idea.

'Perhaps a solitary investigation would be more prudent...'

## Chapter 9

About an hour after the "incident", as Usopp called it, Zoro was returned to their cell. He was unconscious and being dragged by two vampires. Despite still feeling a bit shaken up from his encounter with the pureblood, Luffy rushed forward, ready to retrieve his new friend.

With Usopp and Nami's assistance, they took Zoro from the vampires and laid him gently onto the carpeted floor. Luffy bit his lip at the sight of a massive bandage on his friend's neck, just above the slim collar.

"Luffy." One of the vampires put in, breaking the silence and making him jump slightly, "Would you come here for a second?" It was the one with the funny hat who said he'd 'check up on him' later. He didn't particularly want to go to the vampire, but he did seem kinder than the others...

"Everything's fine, I just want to make sure you're okay...from earlier."

Leaving Zoro in his cell mate's hands, Luffy shakily stood up and shuffled past the other vampires still in their pen to where Mr. Funny Hat was standing towards the door. The vampire slowly sat on the carpet and patted the rug in front of him.

Luffy lowered himself down in front of the vampire, hands still a bit clammy. Mr. Funny Hat introduced himself as Shachi and began to check his pulse and temperature.

"Have you had any more panic attacks or episodes since the last one?" Shachi asked, whispering, "Cap told me about your claustrophobia."

"No...I'm okay." Luffy replied, looking up from where he'd been tracking the vampire's hands. 'Cap' must be Torao. "D-Do we ever get to go outside? Of our cells, I mean."

"Maybe." Shachi informed him smoothly while writing some notes in Luffy's chart, "I'll talk to Cap about it. What about your legs?"

The vampire continued to question him for a few minutes, nodding and writing down stuff occasionally. Thankfully, his legs were feeling better and didn't need as many bandages. He was grateful for that since they were really restricting. His hand didn't need a wrapping anymore, which was also a blessing.

"Glad to see you recovering." Shachi said with a smile, standing up, "Though Lord Second needs to be a little more delicate with our humans...your blood pressure spiked a lot." The last statement was more to himself and he continued to mutter notes even as they all left the cell and locked it tightly behind them.

Sighing, Luffy moved back over to where his new friends were, Zoro now lying on his makeshift bed in the corner.

"Is he gonna be okay?"

"Yeah...his body just needs to rest." Nami replied, pulling the blanket up to Zoro's chin, "What an idiot, making us all worry like that." Luffy chuckled softly and made himself comfortable against the wall so he could watch over his new friend while he slept.

Looking around the room, he began to think how he could use the ropes hanging from the ceiling for something...fun.

Would Zoro object to a swing?

---

As it turned out, running a citadel took a lot of work. There were a ton of areas that needed to be addressed and maintained daily, paperwork to be done, and even general cleaning! Sabo was grateful Lord Phoenix was there to help him through it all.

"Don't worry, you're doing fine." The older vampire soothed as they walked to yet another meeting, this one concerning the humans. Sabo felt bad that he hadn't yet had a chance to truly assert himself in the department, but with Kidd gone, he was stretched thin.

"Thank you, that means a lot." Sabo replied, straitening out his kimono. Marco chuckled and led the way into a meeting room where Trafalgar sat along with some of his keepers. Smiling dutifully, Sabo took his seat in the circle (on the floor, which was taking some getting used to) with Lord Phoenix at his side.

"Now that we're all here...let's begin." Law said while rifling through some of the human charts. Apparently, they did these meetings fairly regularly to talk about any issues, illnesses, or injuries among the humans. "First of all, one of our females is nearing the end of her pregnancy and may give birth at any time. Everyone should be on standby just in case. Second, some of our new acquisitions have been getting aggressive with each other and need to be separated. Jean Bart, I'll leave that up to your discretion."

Sabo glanced to his left at the very large vampire Trafalgar had addressed. He was certainly large enough to handle a few wild humans.

"According to my notes," Law continued, "We have had no major incidents in the last week and are on schedule with harvesting. Does anyone have anything to add or report?" Jean Bart raised his hand.

"As usual, Marimo resisted us at mealtime today, but was easily subjugated. That collar is definitely making it easier on us." Law nodded, seemingly pleased with the result.

"Good, hopefully it will stop him from biting anyone in the future. Yes, Shachi-ya, what is it?" Sabo turned to look at the young keeper who'd raised his hand as well.

"...we did sort of have an incident earlier today..."

Sabo immediately spoke up.

"I apologize, it was my fault." Law raised an eyebrow and motioned for him to continue, "I caught the young human 'Luffy' in a trance to check for something and...well..." Shachi

smiled.

"Don't worry, Lord Second, I just evaluated him and he's fine, just a little scared, I think. But in the future, I recommend holding back, especially on one so young." Sabo chuckled sheepishly in reply, while subtly watching Trafalgar's physical response to their discussion.

The older vampire's eyes had narrowed at the mention of the human, but otherwise, he was the picture of calm and collected.

"I see, I'm glad it was resolved quickly. What exactly were you 'checking for', Lord Second?" Trafalgar asked, leaning on his hand, nonchalant.

"Oh, nothing serious, I just wanted to see if you'd taken blood considering your note." Sabo replied, fake smile plastered onto his face, "May I ask how your research is coming regarding his blood disorder? You've had him for a few days in solitary, yes?" At that, everyone turned to stare at Law, surprised and confused looks on their faces.

"What's this about a blood disorder, yoi?" Marco put in, a concerned furrow between his brows. Law raised a hand to quiet everyone's whispers.

"I apologize for not informing all of you, but yes, I have had a little human in my care ever since the last raid. His blood is dense and very pure, meaning it holds some toxins." Trafalgar explained, eyeing Sabo, "I had some difficulty with him due to claustrophobia and his susceptibility for panic attacks, but I deemed him ready to transfer to the stables last night."

Sabo flinched at the mention of panic attacks, suddenly even more guilty about scaring the poor kid. Thinking back, the boy had been breathing hard and pale...

"What is your plan moving forward?" Lord Phoenix asked, crossing his arms.

"I don't believe this is a permanent condition." Law said with a bow of his head, "Given time, and the right medications, he should be eligible for harvest."

Marco seemed satisfied with Trafalgar's answer and went silent, as did most of the other vampires. Still, Sabo was curious and spoke up again.

"If I may, if his condition does prove to be permanent, what will you do? Dispose of him?" Sabo knew the citadel was quite progressive, but even they had to admit not all humans were useful. Lord Phoenix answered his question.

"We are not in the business of killing children, human or otherwise." He stated, expression neutral, "Even if this boy cannot give blood, I see no reason to not keep him around, yoi."

"Like a pet?"

"I suppose."

"Why not sell him?" Sabo continued to probe, wanting to understand their point of view. There were plenty of human farms out there who would be willing to take the kid off their hands.

"Quite heartless aren't you, Sabo-ya?"

"Merely...realistic." He shot back, "I don't see the point of keeping a human around who simply takes up space and resources." Lord Phoenix exhaled slowly and put a hand on his shoulder.

"To be frank, none of us like the idea of throwing a child to the wolves, so to speak. We'd rather keep him here, even it means as a pet, yoi." The other vampires seemed to agree, voicing how human young were so cute and squishy so it wouldn't be much of a chore to take care of an extra one.

Sabo was amazed. The Whitebeards were simply so...*kind*, willing to keep a human just to stop him from being shipped off somewhere else or killed, usefulness be damned. Though they still saw them as creatures of lower standing, they made sure to treat them well and with at least some semblance of respect (unless a heavier hand was necessary, as he'd witnessed). Since it seemed to be a citadel wide phenomenon, Whitebeard himself must've instilled these values into his subordinates early on.

'I really need to make a trip to the library.' He mused, thinking it would be helpful to read some of the ancient pureblood's own writings, if he could find any.

Shachi interrupted everyone by clearing his throat.

"Speaking of the kid, he asked if it would be possible to get out of his pen once and a while. Since he has a history of claustrophobia, I figured I'd ask."

"I'll allow it," Trafalgar replied, "given one of you takes him out and uses a tether of some sort to keep him from wandering off." Sabo immediately raised his hand.

"May I do it?" Law raised an eyebrow.

"After everything you just said...are you sure?" He nodded.

"To be honest, I greatly respect all of you and your values." Sabo continued, smiling a genuine grin, "It's...refreshing. Perhaps spending some time with a human will help me better understand where you're all coming from. Besides, I feel bad for scaring him."

Law smirked and nodded, effectively ending the meeting.

He was quickly learning that the Whitebeards were unlike any vampire clan he knew and required careful study to truly understand. That being said, Sabo found that he enjoyed it. The dynamic was nothing like the stuffy and privileged purebloods he was used to who would kill a human without a second thought. And, without a doubt, their approach was working! The Moby Dick was thriving, the humans were healthy, and no one wanted for blood.

Maybe this way of life was...better.

---

Marco was no fool.

He'd quickly noticed Sabo's probing and Law's response to it. Even so, whatever was going on regarding the new human child, he trusted Trafalgar's judgment. They'd known each other for a long time after all.

Still, he couldn't help but be curious about this 'Luffy'. A blood disorder could mean nothing, or it could be an indication of something even more dangerous. If it was what Marco suspected, Law would likely keep quiet for a while, content to examine the boy more. He was okay with that, as long as the kid's nature was kept hidden from their new pureblood Lords.

The last thing they needed was the council leaping down their throats or worse, someone decided to raid them for it. War would be comprehensible considering the harboring of such beings was now a capital crime (one his sire had no issue violating).

It was hard enough keeping Law and Ace hidden (especially since the fledgling's memories kept flaring back up), adding another could be problematic...especially one that was still human.

'Damnit, Pops.' Marco sighed, 'I seem to be following your example and collecting D's...'

---

Ace sneezed, shivering in the cold night air.

Their group decided to make camp in the city and would spread out to search it tomorrow. Kidd, their new Lord, wanted them to make a detailed map of the place including all of the human colonies they could find. They weren't to engage them yet, just observe, before moving on to the far reaches of their territory.

To be honest, Ace wasn't sure where Kidd intended to put all of the humans he wanted to eventually capture. It would take a while to build new stables and they were already pushing it...Plus, monopolizing all the humans in the area would probably earn the ire of their neighboring citadels who hunted the area regularly as well.

All in all, Ace was cold, hungry, and missed his little human terribly. This whole mission sucked.

"Jeez, what crawled up here and died?" Thatch teased, jumping up to join him on the ruined balcony overlooking their camp, "You look like you'd rather be anywhere else but here."

Ace groaned and leaned back on his hands to look at the stars.

"This is all a pain in the ass..."

"Yeah, I know, but-"

Suddenly, Ace saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Motioning for Thatch to stop, he pointed silently just beyond their camp. It was dark, but he could tell it was probably a human of some kind.

"What do you want to do?" Thatch asked, glancing back at him, "Inform our new leader?"

"No, I'll handle it." Ace whispered, silently slipping away and skirting around the edge of camp. Leaping down to the sandy ground, he crept up on the figure, surprised to find it was incredibly small...

It was a child, a little girl to be precise.

She peeked around pieces of broken metal at the camp, hunger clear in her eyes. Ace knew what would happen if she was caught, so he steeled himself, ready to intervene. Swiftly so as to avoid detection by their guards (grateful that Thatch chose that moment to "fall", drawing everyone's attention), he plucked the tiny human off her feet and leapt away from the camp.

He immediately covered her mouth to keep her from screaming. Ace felt bad, remembering how scared Lu had been of him...and still was, but this was for her own good.

Once he determined they were far enough away, Ace put the girl down and was met by terrified eyes. This one was much younger than Lu, practically still a babe.

"Hey there, that was dangerous you know." He whispered, balancing on the balls of his feet, "Why don't you run along now...before you're caught." The girl's lip trembled as she backed away, shaking terribly.

Huffing, Ace hissed at her (complete with red eyes and everything), which scared her enough to send her fleeing into the distance. Satisfied with himself, he turned around to head back only to stop when he felt a pair of eyes on him.

Swiveling around, he saw the little girl staring at him from where she was hiding behind a pile of rubble.

"Oi, oi, what part of 'get lost' don't you understand?" He called, somewhat exacerbad. He wanted to let her escape if only for Lu, to prove to him (and himself) that he could be caring towards the human race. But this was more difficult than he thought...

Surprising Ace, the little girl trotted back up to him. She stopped a good ten feet away, out of reach, to bow and whisper a quiet 'thank you'. The tiny thing almost fell over during her bow but managed to right herself and take off in the opposite direction, hopefully back to wherever home was.

'Humans are strange...' He thought as he made his way back to camp, trying and failing to hold in a grin, '...but I think they're growing on me...'

---

The next morning, Zoro finally woke up, still drowsy and weak from having his blood taken. Nami immediately fussed over him, combing out his bed head and chiding him for scaring them.

"Shishishi, I'm glad you're okay." Luffy put in softly, smiling at his new friend. Zoro snorted and leaned up against the wall, face pale.

"Yeah, thanks Luffy."

Breakfast was brought to them like usual, and Zoro didn't even try to fight them (which was probably a good thing). The vampires did think to include some special food for him that was supposed to help "rebuild his blood count" or something like that, Luffy didn't really understand. Once their guards were gone, Zoro spoke up, voice quiet and barely a whisper.

"I think...we should escape."

"W-What?" Usopp stuttered, also whispering and looking around nervously, "Are you serious!?" Zoro nodded.

"Luffy already told us that a bunch of the vampires are going to be out for a while, so this is our chance." Nami frowned and crossed her arms.

"You know that pureblood is still here, right? And, in your condition..."

"I'll be fine in a few days." Zoro shot back, "I just can't stand being treated like livestock...I want to be free again." Luffy knew how he felt but thought there was something even more obvious in their way.

"Won't our tags let them track us?"

"Yeah, we'll need to think of something to deal with that." Zoro replied, shifting so he was leaning over his legs, "...are you three with me, or not?" Their cell was silent. Luffy looked nervously between Nami and Usopp, curious to know what they thought about it. He wanted his freedom back more than anything, but escaping a citadel *tagged* would be nigh impossible. The vampires would just track them down and drag them back.

"Don't even think about it, youngsters." A gravelly voice interrupted, muffled through the wall. It was one of their neighbors who Luffy'd only seen a few times. "If you try to escape and fail, we'll all pay the price."

"You don't think we can do it?" Zoro hissed, hitting his head against the palisade between them.

"I *know* you can't, brat." The old man replied, "I've been here long enough to see young folk like yourselves try and fail miserably. Trust me, it ain't worth the pain." Usopp shivered at the mention of punishment.

"W-What would they do to us?"

"Depends. Sometimes it's lashes or solitary confinement...I saw one poor sod get beaten and shocked with one 'o them electric rods. Pretty sure it varies depending on who's doling out the punishment, but they won't stop there. The rest of us will be punished as well through a loss of outdoor privileges, less food, and the like."

Luffy bit his lip at the thought of other innocent people suffering because of him, especially knowing that Makino and Woop Slap were here somewhere.

"Even so, I want to try." Zoro continued, fists clenched. Just before Nami could say something, the old man tapped two times on the wall and went silent, making all of them



clamp up as well. The sound of footsteps echoed down the hallway.

Luffy's eyes widened as a familiar form stopped in front of their cell, a menacing looking rope in his hands. It was the pureblood.

Almost immediately, Zoro growled and pulled Luffy behind him protectively (having heard about the incident from Nami). The vampire simply tutted softly.

"Now, now, there's no need to be so nervous. Luffy, would you come here please?" He asked with a smile, "You know I can make you, but I really don't want to if I don't *have* to." Shuddering slightly, Luffy pushed himself up, freeing himself from his friend's protective clutches.

"It's okay...I'll be o-okay." He whispered, shaking a little. To be honest, he was scared (terrified the creature knew about *it*), but he tried to put on a brave face so his friends wouldn't be as worried...and not get hurt.

The pureblood opened the cell door, allowing Luffy to step out before swiftly locking it behind him.

"Your wrist please."

Luffy complied, all the while feeling his friends' wide eyes on his back. What did this vampire want with him? The pureblood tied one end of the rope around his left wrist, leaving the short tail in his tight grip.

"That should do it..." The vampire muttered, testing the strength of his knot, "Ready to go on a walk?" Luffy blinked in confusion.

"A...a what?"

"Mr. Shachi said you wanted to go out, so...here I am!" His captor explained with a grin, making Luffy's lip tremble slightly. So now he was a dog? The vampire leaned in with a concerned look on his face. "Is the knot too tight? Or...are you still scared of me?"

Luffy wasn't sure how to respond to that and simply looked down, sweaty hands grabbing at each other. Surprising him, the vampire gently patted his head and knelt down, so they were eye to eye.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you."

At that, the vampire tugged on the rope and led Luffy away, giving him just a few seconds to gaze back at his friends, who wore angry and nervous looks. With no choice but to follow, Luffy padded after the pureblood, praying this wouldn't end poorly.

## Chapter 10

Sabo hummed happily as he led the little human along.

He was quite excited for the opportunity to spend time with a human, one that wasn't necessarily for eating. Glancing back, Sabo noted the boy was having a hard time keeping up and slowed his pace. It seemed the kid had injured his legs somehow and had a slight limp to his gait.

Sabo had always been fascinated by the human race but had never been given the opportunity to study them and their habits up close (or at least in a specimen that had enough energy to move). Now that he'd personally witnessed how they *could* be treated (and preserved), he felt guilty, thinking back on his own family.

Though not of particularly high nobility, they always strove for recognition. This, of course, included importing the "best" humans, not that they ever lasted very long. Most of the poor things died within a week of arriving.

"So, Luffy right?" Sabo asked smoothly, spinning around to face the startled human, "My name is Sabo." The boy shuffled in place.

"H-Hello..."

"Hello." He replied, smiling softly at the boy's nervousness, "Today, as part of your 'outside time' or whatever Trafalgar wants to call it, you'll be accompanying me around the citadel. We'll be going to some important places, so make sure to behave." Luffy nodded silently, absently pulling on the rope.

'He's frightened of me...' Sabo observed, taking in the human's hunched posture and averted eyes, 'I suppose it's understandable after yesterday.'

"Come along now."

Mentally going over his to-do list, Sabo first made his way to Trafalgar's clinic, where he was supposed to go over some files and blood supply reports. Plus, it would give him an opportunity to see how the doctor and Luffy interacted.

Pushing open the door, he tugged the human inside.

"Lord Second, good morning." Penguin greeted, glancing at Luffy who looked around the room with wide eyes, "I see you've got a little follower today...he need a checkup or anything while he's here."

"No thank you, Mr. Penguin." Sabo declined, feeling Luffy tense up behind him, causing the rope to go taut, "Is Law here?"

"Nope, he's over at Stable F. The female he mentioned yesterday went into labor about an hour ago."

Sabo hummed, a little disappointed, but also intrigued. Were human births done the same as vampire's? Leading Luffy over to a chair on the right side of the clinic and tying his rope to the arm, Sabo began signing paperwork.

While it was terribly fascinating to know the inner workings of the citadel, he found his attention drawn to the little human seated across from him. Luffy fidgeted almost constantly, finally coming to a stop on his knees peering into the window that led to the human treatment area (if he recalled correctly).

Sabo put down his pen when the kid inhaled sharply, drawing not only his attention, but the always stationed guard's as well.

"Is something wrong, Luffy?" He called, motioning with his hand for the guard to back up. The human wasn't doing anything wrong, so he wasn't needed.

"It's...M-Makino." Luffy stuttered, a tiny smile appearing on his face, "She's okay..." The boy's tone was full of relief, indicating he knew someone in the treatment area. Curious, Sabo walked up next to him and looked through the window himself.

The human Luffy seemed to know was in the very first bed, a female. She was pale and had a multitude of lines connected to her.

"Could I go see her?" Luffy asked, voice small and timid. Sabo glanced to the guard who shook his head.

"This area's currently under quarantine as a 'clean room'. No one can enter unless they are properly decontaminated." The human immediately drooped in dejection, instinctively making Sabo want to comfort him.

"Maybe we can come back another time."

"Really?" Luffy asked, eyes sparkling with hope. Sabo cleared his throat, trying not to think about how adorable the kid looked.

"I don't see why not."

To keep Luffy busy while he finished with his documentation, Penguin gave the human some paper and crayons, which he immediately took to. It required all of Sabo's will to focus on his work and not watch Luffy draw, which was quite entertaining in and of itself.

The kid kept breaking crayons by pushing too hard on the paper and would subsequently look at the broken utensil with a look of betrayal.

It was quite humorous.

When he finally finished going over and signing the documents, Sabo untethered Luffy so they could move on to his next destination (but not before apologizing to Penguin for his

many broken crayons). He took a quick glance at what Luffy had drawn and his eyes immediately narrowed.

"Luffy, who's this?"

The crudely drawn picture depicted four people: two adults, a smaller person, and a strange person-ish blob in the background. Luffy immediately tried to take the picture back, but Sabo held it up out of his reach, making him whimper. This could hold a clue to the boy's connection with Ace!

Taking a breath to calm himself (and inwardly condemning his rash action that obviously upset Luffy), Sabo turned the page around.

"Please, will you tell me?" Luffy's bottom lip quivered and he seemed almost...embarrassed (or maybe afraid)?

"It's my family..." He admitted quietly, almost in tears. Sabo looked back at the picture with a new perspective, this time noting the taller ones must be his parents. So, it wasn't about Ace after all...

"Is this one you?" He probed, pointing at the smaller person. Luffy nodded. "What about this one back here? Sabo continued, moving his finger to the blob in the back.

Luffy huffed, wiping his eyes.

"It's the mystery person."

"Huh?"

"Somebody my parents used to talk about." Luffy whispered, wringing his hands together, "I dunno their name or anything, just that they're family."

"I see."

It was obvious based on the boy's reaction that his family wasn't around anymore, so Sabo didn't probe. Instead, he subtly passed the picture to Penguin with quiet instructions to add it to the boy's file. The next question was, what to do to cheer the kid up? So far, this walk wasn't going terribly well...*informative*, but not so good.

Sighing, Sabo led Luffy out of the clinic, feeling like he'd just kicked a puppy, and the kid's little sniffles weren't helping. Soon, he found himself at the Blood Depository, where quite a few vampires were having breakfast.

Many of them were dressed in kimonos, much like himself.

"Oi, good morning!"

"You here for breakfast, Lord Second?"

Sabo smiled and waved at his subordinates, pleased his attempts to connect with the Whitebeards seemed to be working. Behind him, Luffy peeked out at the other vampires, eyes wide. One of the vampires sauntered up to them and leaned over the human with a raised eyebrow.

"Ya know, you've got a little pup attached to ya."

Luffy puffed out his cheeks, wiped his eyes, and frowned up at the larger vampire, an expression Sabo hadn't seen before.

"...I'm not little..." He muttered, straightening up slightly, "You're just too big." Sabo was actually shocked. He didn't think the kid was capable of asserting himself given his almost perpetually scared demeanor.

The larger vampire laughed (thankfully...Sabo thought for a moment that he was going to have protect the kid).

"Spunky little brat, ain't ya! Better be careful or that mouth will get you in trouble." Luffy shrugged and stuck his tongue out briefly, but the second his eyes met Sabo's, he backed down and returned to his normal submissive posture.

How odd...

The large vampire, who Sabo remembered was a commander named Blenheim, invited him to sit with them which he accepted. Interacting with his subordinates was important after all. Luffy padded after him but didn't seem to want to sit at the table with them.

"Erm...could I go sit by the water instead?" Luffy asked, tugging lightly on the rope. It was obvious by his pale face that he did not enjoy the sight of vampires drinking cups full of human blood. Noting the creek wasn't too far away, he nodded and let the rope fall from his hand.

"Very well but remember what I said and behave. Okay, Luffy?"

The human nodded and quickly trotted away to seat himself by the water.

"So, what's a pureblood like yourself doing toting a human around?" Blenheim asked, guzzling down a mug of blood.

"Law asked that someone take him outside for some fresh air." Sabo explained, watching Luffy use a stick to make circles in the river, "Apparently, he's claustrophobic and has had panic attacks before. I figured this was as good a chance as any to interact with a human and learn more about them."

"Ehhh..." Blenheim replied, "Noble of ya, though those kinds of issues are fairly common among humans. Still, hard to see them haunting a kid that young...no doubt an orphan."

"Why do you say that?" Sabo questioned, having only just learned that fact himself. Blenheim shrugged.

"Unless they're born in a fairly progressive citadel, young humans like him are usually alone, orphaned at a young age. It's sad, but that's the reality of the world we live in." Sabo closed his eyes in thought, chewing on what he'd just been told.

As much as he hated to admit it, Blenheim was correct. Humans were a hunted and dying race with nowhere to go in the wasteland that was their planet. And since small children weren't terribly useful right away, their parents were often targeted instead, leaving the little ones alone or shipped off to farms until they matured a bit.

'What a terrible system we live by.'

---

Luffy sighed, enjoying the relative peace of the creek. Behind him, the vampires talked and laughed, no doubt savoring their somewhat nauseating breakfast. It reminded him of *that time* when he was little, a memory he would rather forget or risk losing his own breakfast into the pristine water before him.

Poking at the limp rope still tied tightly to his wrist, Luffy thought on his day so far. He'd found Makino which was good! She seemed to be recovering, but then he'd gone and drawn a picture of his family...which was pretty stupid in retrospect.

It had been kind of strange actually. He hadn't thought about the 'mystery person' in many years...so why'd they come to mind now? Luffy didn't know anything personal about them, just that his parents, Mom especially, always said that they'd come back someday.

'Oh well.' He thought, 'It's not like he knows about my pendant or anything...I don't think. Even Ace knows about my family so it's not a big deal.' Letting his hand fall to the ground, he leaned back to look at the sky...only for his head to plop against something...fuzzy?

Blinking in confusion, Luffy realized a dog (a massive one!) had somehow snuck up behind him and was now looming over him.

"Ruff." It barked softly, eyeing him with interest. Luffy immediately twirled around so he was seated facing the dog and beamed. He supposed it was fairly normal for vampires to have dogs around, but he hadn't seen any yet!

This particular dog was grey and white with cool fur around its mouth that made it look like it had a mustache.

Slowly, Luffy raised his hand and began to pet the dog's chest. Its fur was super soft and sooo fluffy! Unable to help himself, he cuddled up to the animal and completely drooped himself onto its large body. Amazingly, it didn't seem to mind and simply licked his hair.

"Stefan, damn dog...where-" Someone screeched, making Luffy look up. It was a mean looking vampire who stomped towards them, a scowl etched onto his face. He was bald on the top of his head but had long pink hair that flowed from the bottom and sides...which Luffy thought was kind of weird.

Surprising both of them, the dog barked, leaned down to pick up Luffy's rope in his mouth, and walked away. The animal was strong, so he had no choice but to follow after the dog, looking back at the vampire nervously.

What...was going on?

---

Sabo's friendly conversation with Blenheim and the other vampires was interrupted by a loud bark and screaming coming from the creek. Immediately on alert, he stood up to see what was going on, and his jaw dropped.

Luffy appeared to be getting kidnapped by a dog, and they were both being chased down by a weird looking vampire who he'd had yet to meet.

"Is that...Stefan?" Blenheim questioned, putting his mug down, "Huh, he doesn't usually come out during the day..."

Saving the explanation on the dog for later, Sabo immediately followed them, concerned the animal would take off in a full sprint and hurt Luffy. For the moment, it was content to lead the boy around, effectively avoiding the pink-haired vampire who was attempting to catch them.

"Why you...drop the human and COME HERE, DAMN IT!"

Stefan barked cynically as if to say 'catch me if you can' before trotting away quickly, bringing Luffy into a swifter jog. That made the unknown vampire angry and his eyes began to burn red.

"All right, you asked for it."

The dog seemed to sense he'd made the vampire truly angry, so he quickly came to a stop, *flung* Luffy onto his back and took off in a mad sprint into the citadel. Sabo cursed under his breath as they charged through the front door, screams and crashes (the breaking of likely valuable objects) left in their wake.

He caught glimpses of them running around the citadel until the dog finally leapt out of the second story window, Luffy clinging to its neck for dear life, and landed back on the front steps. Sabo ran forward in an attempt to block the dog from continuing its rampage, but the second it saw him it trotted off towards the garden area.

The pink-haired vampire leapt out of the broken window breathing heavily and glaring at the dog. Before it could take off again, someone appeared next to the dog and pet its head gently.

"I think that's enough, Stefan, you've made quite a mess."

It was Izo, another commander. He was dressed gracefully as always in a beautiful kimono and had his hair done up in an elegant bun. Izo was the one who'd made his kimono, for which Sabo was very grateful.

"Don't let him get away, Commander!" The pink haired vampire called, still out of breath, "Damn dog led me all over the citadel!"

"Now, now Squard, I'm sure Stefan simply wanted to have some fun." Izo replied while laying a delicate hand on Luffy's head, "Are you all right, little one? That was quite the ride..." The human took deep breath and sat up on the dog, legs dangling and hands gripping fur tightly.

"W-Wow...um...yeah, I'm okay."

Sabo finally allowed his body to relax as he jogged up to Izo and the dog, following his instinct to pluck Luffy off the creature's back and into his arms.

"Thank you, Commander." Sabo said, holding the little human close (ignoring how much the kid tensed up), "Had that gone on, someone might've been hurt." Izo chuckled.

"You're welcome, though I doubt Stefan would've hurt anyone. Damaged property...certainly. Speaking of, what do you have to say for yourself?" He demanded, chiding the dog, "Honestly, you're not a puppy anymore."

Sabo raised an eyebrow as the dog barked before coming up to lick Luffy's leg, making the human giggle. Izo huffed and shooed Stefan away, prompting him to bound off back into the citadel.

"I apologize, Stefan doesn't act out like that often, but he did belong to Pops so it's not all that surprising I suppose."

"Belong to-" Sabo gaped, shifting Luffy in his arms, "How old is he?"

"My...I do believe I've lost track..." Izo hummed, manicured hand coming up to rest on his cheek, "A couple centuries at least. As long as Pops lives, Stefan can't die." Sabo had heard about creatures who were connected to their masters deeply enough that their lives intertwined, but he'd never seen a case of it in real life. Fascinating...

Luffy interrupted his musing by twisting in his grip, wanting to be put down. Sabo obliged, but made sure to grab hold of the rope tightly so he wouldn't lose track of him again.

---

Ace growled to himself as he gazed in the direction of the Moby Dick. He wasn't sure why he was pissed, but he was certain someone was messing with his cute, little Lu. If he wasn't required to stay...

"Oi, you done moping?" Thatch asked from where he was reclining on the top of a ruined building, "Kidd's asking for us." Ace huffed and turned to follow the older vampire, but not before casting one last longing look towards home.

They'd done a lot of scouting already and had mapped the locations of three major human colonies within the city limits. There were a few smaller groups of humans wandering around here and there, but nothing worth noting.



Surprisingly, they had yet to run into any hunting parties from other citadels which was... odd. There were usually at least a few around, not to mention the occasional rogue passing through.

Ace grunted when he hit the ground and quietly followed Thatch into their new Lord's temporary headquarters, a tent pitched around some fallen rubble. Inside Eustass Kidd was pouring over maps flanked by his always serious companion, Killer. Ace didn't like that he always wore a mask...like he was hiding something.

"Thatch, right?" The pureblood asked, looking up from his maps, "You know this area well?"

"Sure do!" Thatch chirped, throwing his arm around Ace's shoulders, "And Acey here knows the city like the back of his hand!" Kidd snorted in amusement but didn't smile.

"Good. In that case, come give me the rundown of our...neighbors."

The maps he was looking at were all of their citadel, the city, and the surrounding area. Some were newly drawn with the locations of the colonies they'd discovered that very day.

"Welp, let's start here then." Thatch began, drawing a circle in red pen to the north of the city, "This is Upper Yard, ruled by a pureblood named Enel. Perhaps you've heard of him?"

"Yeah...all earlobes and narcissism."

"Right on the money. Enel rules his citadel with an iron fist and sends out hunting parties regularly. He hoards 'beautiful' humans, especially females, and demands reverence from pretty much everyone." Thatch huffed, "I pity any human who gets picked up by one of his subordinates...poor things."

Ace frowned, remembering his own albeit *brief* interaction with the vampire. He made pretty much everyone want to punch him in his stupid face, especially when he insulted Marco for not being a pureblood.

"Moving on." Thatch continued, drawing a second circle far to the east of the city, "This is Rain Base, ruled by Crocodile. As our neighbors go, he's probably the most, dare I say, reasonable. He doesn't send his people hunting very often because his humans are actually treated fairly well, but he did have a pretty big fight with Pops a while back, so he generally doesn't like us."

Ace had met Crocodile as well and remembered feeling intimidated. He'd been newly changed at the time, but against those piercing eyes, anyone would feel the need to bow their head. Ace also remembered Rain Base as a beautiful citadel, pulling from an ancient human culture much like the Moby Dick.

It was rich in gold and water, utilizing the sand all around them to create an oasis. The one thing that really stood out to him though was the humans held there. Crocodile seemed to enjoy dressing them up with collars and pretty silks so he could parade them around like the obvious slaves they were.

The thought of Luffy in that garb made him shudder. Thank goodness the human had been found by him, otherwise...

"Lastly, there's Germa, home to the Vinsmoke clan." Thatch said while circling an area northeast of the city, "They're...well, they're difficult. Any human they take doesn't come out of there alive, probably due to their creepy experiments. Rumor has it they're trying to develop some kind of serum or drug that will replace blood and make humans completely obsolete."

Though he'd never met any of the Vinsmokes, their reputation as a military power was fearsome. Ace knew their citadel was practically a fortress of technology just from observing it but had no intention of ever going inside. On top of their human experiments, they worked on vampires as well, nearly getting them indicted by the council multiple times.

In other words, they were a clan to be avoided at all costs.

"Damn, a bunch of troublemakers..." Kidd said with a smirk, eyeing the three red circles, "Anyone else I should know about?" Thatch brought a hand to his jaw in thought.

"We get the occasional rogue or group passing through, but not often considering how far we are from the main compounds..."

"What about the human group that's been attacking our supply routes?" Ace put in, drawing everyone's attention.

"That's right!" Thatch exclaimed, grabbing the pen again and drawing a red 'X' just to the northwest of the Moby Dick, "We estimate their main hideout is around here somewhere, but haven't sent anyone to scout the area yet."

"Why haven't you tried to put them down quickly?" Killer questioned stoically, making Ace frown.

"Well...they haven't exactly done any substantial damage and certainly don't have the proper weaponry, so we've let them be for now." Thatch answered, "Plus, your arrival kind of threw a wrench into things, no offense."

Kidd shrugged and returned his attention to the map.

"I'm more concerned with these three...what are the odds of a successful meeting with them? All three of them." Ace's eyes widened and he exchanged nervous glances with Thatch. Was he serious?

"Er...probably pretty low..."

At that, Kidd smirked and waved them out, content to whisper with his masked friend. Outside the tent, Thatch exhaled sharply.

"I certainly hope he's not planning what I think he's planning."

---

After an interesting breakfast, Sabo decided to take Luffy for a snack and then back to the stables so he could finish his more...sensitive work. He felt bad that their walk hadn't gone terribly well, but he supposed it was a start.

It would take a while for him to break through the wall Luffy'd built up, especially since he seemed more confident around the other vampires.

'Maybe it's because I'm a pureblood.' Sabo mused, taking a turn towards the kitchens. Only time would tell. They were immediately met by a collection of interesting smells, some sour and some sweet. Luffy came up beside him and looked around in awe.

"Lord Second?" A vampire wearing an apron asked, coming up to them, "What brings you all the way here this morning? Want something to go with your blood?"

"No, no, it's not for me." Sabo answered, motioning to Luffy, "Could you get him something?" The chef looked over the boy in confusion but nodded.

"Uh, sure. Anything in particular?" At that, Luffy stepped forward, a hopeful look on his face.

"Ne, is this where the fluffy c- I mean, pancakes are made?" He was practically drooling in anticipation, giving the chef his impressive doe eyes. The vampire chuckled and nodded.

"Sure is! You want some, kid?"

Luffy nodded enthusiastically, practically bouncing in place. He was so excited that Sabo decided to allow him to watch the preparation up close while he observed from the doorway. Another chef came up to him and smiled, equally amused at Luffy's antics.

"Don't worry, we won't let him get burned."

"Much appreciated." Sabo huffed. Having Luffy's skinny arms so close to a searing pan made him anxious. The female vampire held in a laugh as the little human's head went up and down with the flipped dough.

"What an adorable human...I am surprised he knows about pancakes though, it's doubtful he had the opportunity to try them in the wastes." Sabo was also confused about that and intended to ask him before sending him back to the stables.

About fifteen minutes later, Luffy had a plate full of pancakes, all done up with syrup and chocolate chips. His face beamed with happiness as he stuck his fork into it and ate with gusto. Sabo couldn't hold in a smile at the way Luffy's legs swayed back and forth happily and his eyes sparkled.

Happiness suited him.

Once he was done and bowed to the chefs (at Sabo's instruction), they headed back outside towards Stable G. Luffy seemed a little more relaxed then he had been, which was good, a step in the right direction.

Sabo could see Luffy's pen mates in the outdoor portion of their cell, pointing at them and rushing inside, likely to greet their friend.

"Luffy." Sabo said, coming to a stop, "Did you enjoy getting some time outside?" The human hummed and made a small noise of affirmation.

"Erm...yeah, I guess. The fluffy cakes were really good..."

"Have you had pancakes before?" He questioned, watching Luffy's eyes grow wide and his posture become closed off, "Maybe...with Law?"

*"Ne, is this where the fluffy c- I mean, pancakes are made?"* That statement in and of itself indicated he'd eaten them here in the citadel. Luffy stayed silent though, biting his lip to keep himself from speaking.

"Or perhaps...with Ace?"

Luffy's breath hitched at the name, and he attempted to shuffle away from him. Sabo didn't let him go and observed the kid's behavior closely. Something had definitely happened between the two of them, but what?

"Never mind, I'm sorry for upsetting you." Sabo smoothly put in while ruffling Luffy's hair playfully. No need to cause him more stress, there was always next time. At that, he led the human back into the stable.

Once they got close to the boy's pen, the other occupants were at the bars calling for Luffy in relief. Seconds after the rope was untied from the kid's wrist, the little human knelt in front of the bars and gratefully accepted a quick hug from the female.

Watching them interact, something clicked in his mind.

'Back then...with Ace...he hadn't been drinking from him at all!' Sabo thought, gently maneuvering the human back into his pen, 'He was *hugging* Luffy...but why?'

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

After some more relaxing chapters, things are going to pick up for a little while ;) Fair warning: Bellamy's a jerk, and a creep. Anyway, I hope ya'll enjoy!

As the days went by, Luffy fell into a routine.

They'd have breakfast in the morning, go outside, and get some exercise if the weather was nice. After lunch, they'd play some games or take a nap, sometimes just talking to each other. Luffy was also getting used to Sabo coming to get him almost every morning for his 'walk', which was quickly growing on him.

The pureblood would take him around the citadel, mostly outside, and just...let him roam. He'd gotten some strange looks from other vampires, but with Sabo there, Luffy was never questioned.

Torao came to see him a couple times, but mostly just to do a quick check-up and take blood samples. They were almost never left alone, which irked Luffy as he really wanted to question the vampire further about their 'similarities'.

As he had now seen a lot more of the citadel, Zoro started asking him to make notes of the layout and report back. Despite everyone's reservations, the green-haired human desperately wanted to escape and refused to give up trying. Luffy did his best but wasn't sure exactly what Zoro wanted to know.

After all, if they couldn't do anything about their tags, there was no point in planning an escape.

Now, a week and a few days since Ace had left, Luffy stretched his arms up like a cat, waking up when breakfast was brought for them. Though he hated to admit it, living as one of the citadel's humans was fairly comfortable. Granted, compared to what he'd come from, *anything* was better.

"Morning." Usopp slurred, still drowsy. Luffy smiled and wiped sleep from his eyes, ready to dig into their breakfast. Nami joined them a few minutes later.

He glanced up from his meal to look at Zoro, confused why his friend wasn't eating.

"Are you feeling sick, Zoro?" Luffy asked with big eyes, gaining the older male's attention. Zoro grunted, lip curling up slightly.

"Nah, just sick of being here...treated like a damn animal."

"I know you want to escape, so do I." Nami put in, taking a break from her eggs, "But we have yet to come up with something remotely plausible." Luffy looked down and bit his lip, feeling somewhat responsible. His 'scouting' wasn't very useful.

Before the conversation could continue, a large group of vampires entered the stable, heavily armed. They started opening up cells and taking out all of the occupants.

"What's going on?"

"Finally, I was really starting to smell." Nami said, quickly finishing her plate. Zoro's eyes hardened and he stomped away into the outdoor portion of their cell while Usopp leaned over to whisper in his ear.

"It's time for us to bathe, for real!"

Luffy blinked, curious how that was going to work. They had a small bathroom in their pen, but it didn't have a bath or basin large enough to clean their bodies thoroughly. He'd been just splashing water on his face...he was used to being filthy, so it wasn't a huge deal.

A few minutes later it was their turn, and about six vampires entered, led by the large vampire who worked for Torao...what was his name? Bean or something? At the creature's order, Luffy, Usopp, and Nami were lined up against the bars so their hands could be cuffed behind their backs.

The leader went himself to drag Zoro inside, chains wrapped around his torso and a pole attached to his collar.

"DON'T TOUCH ME, YOU BASTARDS!" Zoro exclaimed, pulling hard against his restraints. Luffy quickly stood up and made to help but was held back by another vampire.

"Stay put." He was warned, the vampire's grip on his upper arm tightening. Luffy's eyes darted anxiously between his friend and the vampires, scared they'd electrocute him again.

"Let's go." The leader said, his big hand around the back of Zoro's neck securely, just barely avoiding the collar. Luffy, Usopp, and Nami were led outside first, surrounded by their dangerous escorts. Zoro took up the rear, dragged along like a rabid animal.

"It's okay..." Nami whispered, cracking a smile at him, "Don't be nervous, Zoro's just over reacting." Luffy nodded, grateful for the encouragement.

As it turned out, the 'human bathing area' was sectioned off right next to the outer wall, complete with tents, outdoor showers, and many large basins full of water. There was an area for men and one for woman. From what Luffy could tell, the vampires had some sort of system to control how many of them went to bathe at a time.

At the entrance to the main and largest tent was Torao, looking tired and done with everyone as usual. He raised an eyebrow at Zoro.

"Do you need any assistance, Jean-ya?"

"No, I got him." The vampire replied, shaking Zoro slightly to emphasize the control he had. Torao nodded and turned to the rest of them.

"You have twenty-five minutes to get yourselves clean, so don't linger." Before he could be led into the large tent with the other guys, Torao grabbed his arm. "I need to do a quick physical exam of this one." The other vampires didn't question their boss' decision and simply pushed Usopp and Zoro forward into the tent.

Luffy was firmly led to a smaller tent to the side of the main one, making him feel a bit nervous. What did Torao want?

"Do relax, Luffy-ya," The vampire soothed, "unless you *want* everyone to see your pendant?" He flinched, having momentarily forgotten that that would be problem in a public bath...

"Erm...no, I don't."

"As I suspected...so, I'll hold onto it for you." Luffy immediately went to protest but was stopped by the vampire's clawed hand, "I swear that I will return it to you when you're done. Trust me."

Seeing that he didn't have much of a choice, Luffy didn't struggle as the pendant was gently removed from his neck and stored in the vampire's pocket.

A few minutes later, Luffy had joined his friends in the large tent, escorted by Torao. The vampire removed his cuffs and passed him off to one of the guards, who immediately ordered him to strip off all of his clothing. Luffy bit his lip and glanced around, painfully aware of how many other naked guys there were around.

"Come on, we don't have all day." The guard said, sounding a little annoyed. Not wanting to make anyone mad, Luffy did as he was told. He didn't have much clothing, just the shorts, underwear, and shirt provided to him by Torao, the same uniform all of the captive humans wore.

Thankfully, he no longer had to wear any bandages.

When he was free from all his clothing, the guard immediately walked around him, as if checking for something. Honestly, it made Luffy feel a bit...self-conscious, like he was on display or something.

"You're clear." The guard stated, using a device to scan his tag, making it beep. Before Luffy had time to think on what that meant, he was pushed through the back flaps of the tent out into the actual bathing area.

There were quite a few people, all chatting quietly as they stood under the shower heads or reclined in one of the large basins. Thankfully, it wasn't hard to locate Zoro and Usopp.

"Hey, you made it! What'd that jerk want...*woah*..." The long-nosed teen gaped down at Luffy's chest, eyeing his massive scar, "W-What happened to you?" Zoro also seemed interested, but simply eyed him, saying nothing.

"...a vampire..." Luffy whispered, hugging himself at the memory, "Sorry, I don't really want to talk about it." Thankfully, his friends seemed to understand and moved over to the corner to start getting themselves clean.

It was actually really nice to take a bath. Plus, the water was warm, a luxury he hadn't had out in the wastes (but had experienced with Torao that night he'd taken him away from Ace... granted, he was super stressed at the time and hadn't really enjoyed it). When he struggled to reach around to his back, Zoro offered to do it for him.

Luffy practically purred as Zoro moved up to his hair, gently massaging his scalp. This was nice...

A few minutes later, he was clean and dripping wet. While he sat on a bench and waited for his friends to finish, Luffy scanned the other humans, curious about his fellow captives. Most of them were just a bit older than him.

"Hey, you." Someone whispered, earning his attention. It was a tall blonde guy that seemed... familiar. The stranger moved to sit next to him, eyeing the guards watching them with disguised caution. "I remember you...from the sanctuary."

Luffy furrowed his brows, trying to remember the man. He had a very 'punchable' face (that the vampires had obviously utilized) with beady eyes and a devilish smirk...wait...

"You're the guy who was bragging about killing a vampire!" Luffy exclaimed, doing his best to stay somewhat quiet. How was he still alive? As far as he knew, the Whitebeards didn't offer mercy to those who harmed one of their own.

The man smirked and put his arm around him harshly.

"So, you do remember! I'm flattered." The guy leaned in, so his mouth was right by his ear, "I hear Roronoa's hatching an escape plan, and I want in." Luffy pushed the larger male away, uncomfortable with how close he was.

"There is no plan." Luffy hissed, getting up to go join his friends. The guy stopped him by grabbing his shoulder and wrenching it painfully to get him to sit back down.

"Oh, I know, that's why I'm offering my services. With me and my team's help, we can get out of here." Luffy growled and finally ripped the man's arm off him.

"Leave me alone!"

He jogged quickly over to Zoro and Usopp, making them look up.

"Something wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong." The creepy stalker guy said with a smirk, grabbing Luffy around the neck this time, muscular arm tight around his airway, "I'm just having a little chat with the runt here." Needless to say, at this point, the guards had noticed.



Amidst all the yells and sound of a fight getting started, Luffy's vision was starting to go black. He'd been so frustrated at his weakness against the vampires, but this was a *human*. Wasting no time, Luffy used all his strength to flip the large man over his shoulder and onto the ground, forcing him to release his grip on his neck.

While he collapsed onto the wet grass coughing, Zoro viciously attacked the blonde man. His friend was strong and pushed him back against the stone wall, only for the other guy to whisper something into his ear as they struggled.

Zoro seemed to consider it for a moment before punching the man in the face.

Luffy didn't move as the vampires rushed them, swiftly grabbing his arms and tearing Zoro off the other male.

"You touch him again and I'll kill you!" Zoro spit, lashing out again at the blonde. Luffy could feel that his friend was genuinely angry, but there was something else there...like...a look of acknowledgment. The blonde cackled and struggled against his own captors.

"Just try it, *Marimo!* Both you and the runt will regret crossing me!"

The bath area was quickly evacuated until only Luffy, Zoro, and the still unnamed man remained. They were dragged back into the main tent and forcefully dressed, which wasn't a very pleasant experience.

Luffy was placed on a bench, hands cuffed behind him again, while Torao grabbed his chin and tilted it up to look at his neck.

"It'll bruise, but nothing serious." He determined, lowering his hand, "I can't imagine what you and Marimo did to piss Hyena off so much..."

"If I may, Sir." A guard interrupted, one Luffy recognized from the bath area, "Hyena approached this one and started to harass him. Marimo didn't intervene until it got violent." Torao hummed and turned back to him.

"Is this true, Luffy-ya?"

He bit his lip and nodded, remembering how 'Hyena' had grabbed him. Luffy sincerely hoped Zoro and that jerk hadn't come to some of agreement. The last thing they needed was Mr. Jerk-Face pushing Zoro to escape with them. Luffy didn't trust the blonde as far as he could throw him (literally). Before Torao could say anything else, a robed figure rushed into the tent.

"What the hell happened!?" It was Sabo. The pureblood quickly knelt before Luffy and took his face in his clawed hands, tilting it around delicately.

"One of the other humans attacked him." Torao explained, "Hyena, actually. We don't have a clear motive right now...other than the obvious." Sabo growled, making his fangs elongate. Luffy swallowed nervously. Even though he felt a little better about the pureblood, having his fangs so close to his neck was a bit...terrifying.

"What are our options?"

"I recommend we keep them separated, which shouldn't be hard considering they're in different stables." Torao suggested, "He's scheduled to be executed soon after Eustass-ya returns, so there's really no point in additional punishment."

Sabo nodded and released Luffy's face, fangs retreating back into his gums.

"All right, I trust your judgment. Do you need anything, Luffy? Food...or a walk perhaps?" The still shaken boy shook his head. All he wanted was to go back to his friends and rest... put what happened behind him.

Torao offered to take Luffy back to his cell, leaving Sabo behind. The pureblood had an expression of concern on his face but didn't follow them. Just before they entered the stable, Torao slipped his hand into Luffy's, depositing the familiar weight of his necklace.

"Thanks." He whispered, glancing up at the tall vampire. Torao nodded, but said nothing, simply moving his cold hand up to Luffy's upper back and pushing him back into his cell, taking a few seconds to free him from the cuffs.

Once inside, Luffy clasped his precious pendant around his neck (making sure to hide it beneath his shirt) and immediately noticed that his friends were outside, clumped together and speaking in low tones.

"We don't know this guy at all!" Nami hissed, "How can we trust someone who practically molested Luffy in the bath!?" Zoro huffed.

"I gave him hell for harassing Luffy, but it was all a ploy to pass on the information to me without the guards getting suspicious. Even you have to admit that's clever." Nami was about to spit another likely toxic response but stopped when Luffy sat down to join them.

"Hey...you all right?" Zoro asked, looking a bit guilty.

"Yeah, I'm good." Luffy replied, "Did...did he say something to you?"

"Yep, that's what we're talking about." Usopp put in with a frown, "Apparently, the guy has a way to block our tags' signal for a while." The long-nosed teen then pulled out a little packet. "One of his friends slipped me this on our way out, it's a longer version of what that guy told Zoro."

Luffy glanced at the packet but didn't take it. He couldn't read, so he waited patiently for Usopp to explain what the guy had written down.

---

Sabo was pissed off.

One of the boy's fellow humans had injured and possibly violated Luffy, *his* human! How dare he!? It took all his self-control to not tear the smirking male's throat out. So, he went for a less permanent option.

The human cried out in pain as Sabo grabbed him by the hair and yanked him off his feet.

"You're very lucky Lord Phoenix wants a public execution," He growled, shaking the man effortlessly, "otherwise, I would tear your limbs off right here and let your corpse rot with the rest of the trash." Doing his best to hold back, Sabo punched the human so hard he flew through the benches and tent wall, making a bit of a mess, but it satisfied his fury...a bit.

He still wanted to tear the man apart, but that wouldn't be proper.

"Take him away." Sabo ordered a nearby guard, who was watching with big eyes. Crap, he was starting to scare some of his still new subordinates.

'I need to calm down.' He thought, leaving the tent.

When Luffy denied food of all things, Sabo had immediately become concerned for the poor thing. Though they hadn't known each other for very long, the pureblood figured out right away that the kid loved to eat and would never deny food of any sort.

Hopefully some time to rest and recover with his companions would help...but Sabo still determined to visit Luffy later, just to check up on him.

It was hard to believe just how possessive he'd become of Luffy in just a week.

Shaking his head, Sabo made his way back into the main building, heading straight for where he had been told the library was. He'd been so busy that he hadn't gotten a chance to go, and now was as good a chance as any. What better way to calm himself than books?

The library itself was located in the basement of the citadel. It took a bit of pressure to push the rusty hinges open, but inside, it was like a wonderland of knowledge. Everywhere Sabo looked, there was shelf after shelf, filled to the brim with books of all sizes.

'Man, Law wasn't kidding when he said Whitebeard had a collection...'

Unsure of where to start, Sabo began to wander around aimlessly, eyes prancing between book titles. There was just so MUCH! Finally deciding he should use his time wisely, he settled himself in a section that held information on the citadel.

Perhaps there would be something about its history?

---

Luffy swallowed instinctively after hearing Bellamy's (apparently the jerk's real name) plan. It was risky and put a lot of said risk on them.

"I think we should do it." Zoro stated, eyes determined, "We may never get another chance like this. The main soldiers are gone, and these guys have the tools we'll need to escape."

"...and if they betray us?" Nami whispered, obviously not liking the plan.

"We kill them."

They sat in silence for a second, everyone twitching with nerves. Luffy in particular felt scared for a different reason. If they got caught, he would have to deal with Torao, Sabo, and probably even Ace! On top of that, all the other innocent people trapped in the citadel would be punished, something he had trouble stomaching.

"W-When do they want to move?" Usopp asked, hands trembling slightly. Zoro's eyes narrowed.

"Tonight. If we're doing this, we need to decide now." The green-haired man looked between them, urging them to speak up. Luffy chewed on his bottom lip, truly unsure what they should do.

"I'm in." Luffy looked up in surprise when Usopp was the first one to agree, "If this is our only shot, I say we take it!" Despite her harsh resistance, Nami gave in as well, saying she would be stupid to pass up the opportunity to be free again.

Everyone turned and looked at him expectedly.

"I-I...erm..."

"We can do this, Luffy." Zoro encouraged, "You don't have to be afraid of the vampires, the pureblood, 'Ace', none of them. We'll protect you. Besides, once we're out of here, you'll have a place with us, a new home."

All of it sounded wonderful, and Luffy hated being seen as weak and scared. Despite his somewhat complicated relationship with Sabo, Torao, and Ace that made him feel *wanted*, maybe it was time to escape?

Maybe it was time to be among his own kind again, free of chains and cages?

"Okay, let's go!"

---

When night fell, they started making their preparations (not that they had much to bring with them). Luffy bemoaned the fact that his bag was still locked up somewhere by Torao, so he'd be forced to leave his sowing kit behind. Oh well, he could just make another one.

The plan was to break themselves out, and then send Nami to the other stable to subtly get their 'allies' out. Apparently, she was quite skilled as a thief and 'locksmith'. From there, they would run to the vehicle depot, steal a van, and drive out the front gate.

Luffy wasn't sure why the guards were going to just let them out, but Bellamy seemed confident enough in his letter. He had his reservations about working with the jerk, but they didn't really have much of a choice.

Just after midnight, they made their move.

Nami swiftly picked the lock to their cell, making sure no guards were around. It was strange, to move around when almost no one was awake (especially considering they were vampires...). Zoro led the way, always making sure Luffy and Usopp were right on his tail.

They snuck around to the front of the citadel, avoiding lights and the sight of guards posted on the wall. Luffy glanced around a corner, only to gasp when he saw that a guard was coming straight for them. Before he could say anything, Zoro pulled him into a shadow, hand over his mouth.

Not daring to even breath, they waited for the vampire to pass, Usopp releasing a quiet puff of air when the guard walked back towards the citadel.

"T-That was close..." Zoro bopped Usopp on the head for speaking before leading them through the shadows towards where the vehicles were parked. Luffy looked around as they made their way through the many gardens, cool air blowing his hair back.

It would be a bit of a shock to go back into the wastes after enjoying the engineered atmosphere...

Luffy flinched as they passed the Blood Depository and the creek where he'd met Stefan. Now that had been an interesting day, riding around on a dog, eating pancakes with Sabo... like he had with Ace. Wait, was he feeling...*regret*? Why should he feel anything towards the vampires who'd kidnapped him and held him against his will?

Even so, he had been treated kindly...

He was brought back to reality when they reached their destination, a large metal door. Zoro motioned for them to keep watch while he worked on the door. It didn't take long for Nami to arrive, a group of six following after her.

"Where's your stuff?" Zoro asked, finally getting the door open, "This all means nothing if we can't mask our tags."

"Don't worry, it should already be inside." Bellamy replied, glancing to wink down at Luffy, making him glare back. His face was even more swollen and messed up then it had been earlier. This guy was definitely bad news.

Inside, there were a ton of vehicles, but most obvious was the vampire leaning against one of the vans. Zoro immediately got into a fighting position, but Bellamy pushed him aside.

"Relax, he's with me."

The vampire glared at Bellamy but motioned with his head to a bag by his feet.

"They're in there." The cloth bag held wads of...foil? Luffy looked quizzically at the sheet he was given, moving it around in his hands. What was he supposed to do with it?

"Wrap it around your arm, it'll mask the signal. It won't work forever though." Luffy jumped as the vampire addressed him directly, still confused why he was helping them. Bellamy cackled and threw an arm around the brunette vampire.

"I appreciate your help, *Doma*." He sneered, tongue coming out of his mouth. The vampire glared down in disgust at the human.

"I'm not doing this because I want to, scum." Bellamy laughed again.

"Oh, I know. Don't worry, your little friend will be returned safe and sound once we're all out of here."

Luffy wasn't sure what was going on, but Bellamy obviously had something on the vampire. Zoro quickly ushered him into the van, followed closely by the rest of their group. Doma was forced into the driver's seat, much to his chagrin.

"Drive, vamp."

Doma hissed lightly but started up the vehicle none-the-less. A few minutes later, they approached the main gate. Everyone in the back of the van went completely silent as the guard held a light up to their vampire escort's face.

"Doma? Where are you going so late?"

"Emergency supply run." The vampire replied, "We're almost out of booze." At that, the guard let them by quickly, not bothering to check the back. Wow, they really liked their alcohol...

It didn't take long to raise the gate and drive out into the wastes. Luffy got up on his knees and glanced through one of the small windows, somewhat sad to see nothing but sand once again. He'd enjoyed the coolness and beauty of the citadel, despite his position as livestock.

"See, told you it'd work." Bellamy gloated, moving himself up next to Doma, "Go faster! We've gotta get far away before the bastards realize we're gone."

Next to him, Zoro exhaled slowly, obviously relieved. Luffy felt good too but couldn't seem to get rid of the knot in his stomach. These 'allies' of theirs definitely weren't trustworthy, and the foil wouldn't work forever.

Where would they go from here?

---

Sabo snorted as he woke up, face plastered to the inside of whatever book he had been reading. Yawning, he looked around, trying to find the time.

'Well crap...it's morning again...' He moaned, hating that he hadn't gotten a chance to check on Luffy. Apparently, he'd been more worn out than he thought, spending the entire day reading and then falling asleep like a child. Still, the library was awesome! Sabo had learned so much about the citadel after going through almost all of the books in the section he'd camped out in.

His memory made reading and retention a simple task.

A little unstable on his feet (understandable seeing it was around 5 AM), Sabo stumbled into one of the bookshelves on his way back up the stairs. He really needed some coffee-

His head jolted up as the citadel-wide alarm began to sound. Instantly more awake, Sabo pulled himself together and ran out to see what was going on. Not everyone was awake yet, but Lord Phoenix stood out on the main steps, arms crossed.

"What happened?" He asked, looking around. Were they under attack or something? Marco sighed.

"A number of humans have escaped, yoi. When the keepers went to feed them this morning, all they found was pillows and blankets."

Sabo blinked, honestly shocked. That hadn't been what he was expecting. Marco turned towards Stable C, where Law excited, flanked by two of his keepers.

"How many, yoi?"

"Ten." Trafalgar replied, straightening his kimono, "Six from C and four from G." Sabo gulped at that.

"W-Was it-"

"Luffy-ya is with them. His whole pen is gone."

Sabo's body went cold. Luffy...had escaped? But why? He knew the boy was still scared of him, but he didn't think the kid would actually run away. Marco put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, they shouldn't be difficult to track down."

"That's just it." Law interrupted, flipping around his pad for them to see, "Somehow, they're masking their tags' signals. We can't get a good reading on their location." The dots on the digital map were flashing and bouncing around erratically.

"S-So what do we do?" Sabo exclaimed, hands clenched, "We have to get Luffy back!" He didn't particularly care about the rest of them, but Luffy was special. The boy didn't deserve a life out in the wastes. Besides, if he wasn't here, *with him*, some other vampire could come and snatch him up!

Like hell Sabo would let that happen.

"We'll track them the old fashioned way, and, if I'm right, I imagine we'll get a signal back soon enough." Law said, a smirk coming to his lips, "I can have a capture team ready in twenty minutes. They won't get away."

## Chapter 12

Luffy jolted awake as the van hit a particularly large bump, almost sending him to the floor and bringing a harsh curse out of Zoro. They'd been traveling for a while now, driving through the night to put as much distance between them and the citadel as possible.

Sitting up to look out the window, all he could see was sand, a stark reminder that he was back in the wastes.

With a huff, he settled himself back onto the seat, pulling the foil tighter around his arm. By now, the vampires likely knew they were gone and would be coming after them.

"Keep sharp!" Bellamy called back from the front seat, "We need to find somewhere to ditch the van."

"W-We're going on foot?" Usopp questioned, eyes wide.

"We can't risk them tracking us through the vehicle." Bellamy explained with a roll of his eyes, "Plus, we're just about out of gas." From his experience, Luffy knew that gas was hard to come by, so this was probably the right decision.

About thirty minutes later, their vampire escort Doma parked the van under a nearby rocky outcrop. It wasn't much but did provide some occlusion from the main road. When the back doors were opened, Luffy was immediately met with a familiar mouthful of sand, which he promptly spit out.

"Home sweet home." Zoro whispered, stepping out onto the sand and wincing a bit. They'd fashioned crude shoes from the seat covers in the vehicle, but they didn't provide much protection from the arid heat of the ground.

Luffy took it slow, inching his way down onto the sand. Unfortunately, none of them were dressed properly for this kind of extreme heat and they needed a change of clothes *desperately*, otherwise they'd burn and die from heat exhaustion.

"All right, listen up!" Bellamy bellowed, drawing their attention, "The foil will keep doing its job for a while, but it will also store heat. In other words, we need to get these tags out ASAP." Luffy glanced to his friends, confused who'd made the blonde leader. Zoro put a hand on his shoulder and stepped forward.

"I certainly hope you've thought this far ahead."

"Oh, ye of little faith..." Bellamy chided, clicking his tongue, "Of course I have. All our years exploring the wastes weren't for nothing." He turned around and pointed in a seemingly random direction.

"There's a strange hermit who lives in that direction...oh, about a day's walk or so. He should have the ability to remove our tags."



'Yeah, if we survive the trek...' Luffy thought, looking down at his feeble garb. They were underestimating the harshness of the wastes. Two of Bellamy's goons grabbed Doma and pushed him ahead.

"Let's go."

"He's going with us?" Nami asked while pushing hair off her already sweating forehead.

"Yeah, we're not done with him yet."

After using what they could from the van to create make-shift cloaks, they headed out across the unending desert. To Luffy, it was familiar, but certainly not comfortable. He found himself missing the cool atmosphere of the citadel, despite only being exposed to it for a little while.

What was a bit concerning was the fact that Bellamy and his crew were now armed, having looted the van of its hidden weaponry (that they'd neglected to inform them about) ... weapons that were definitely powerful enough to affect even a vampire. Luffy could tell they were high quality due to the slight blue hue that came off of them. When Zoro had asked for one, he'd been denied, saying there "weren't enough".

Yeah, right.

Doma was now handcuffed and being pulled along behind them by a rope. The vampire's cuffs were strong, so he wasn't going anywhere, not weakened like he was.

As he'd expected, the trek was hot and difficult. Not long after midday, Luffy stepped in to carry Nami when she almost collapsed from the heat. Out of all of them, she seemed least able to adapt quickly to the change in environment.

When the sun finally went down, they opted to take a break in a rocky cave spotted by Sarquiss, one of Bellamy's comrades. They couldn't stop for long, or risk getting caught.

The night belonged to the vampires after all.

Luffy gently placed Nami on the cooling stone and shivered slightly as the night's chill began to set in. Soon everyone was inside the cave and breathing heavily, taking in as much cool air as possible. He considered taking a short nap before Bellamy stood back up, a dark smirk on his face.

"Now that we're away from the main road..." The older male swung his weapon around his back, stalked forward, and kicked Doma in the face, sending him sprawling to the floor, "... we've got to get rid of our little friend here."

Luffy's eyes widened as the group of humans surrounded the vampire and began to beat him mercilessly. Didn't they know what would happen if they killed him!? Pushing past Zoro, he threw himself into the fray and on top of the vampire.

"Stop it, you're killing him!" Luffy exclaimed hoarsely, taking a few hits himself. Bellamy snarled down at him before whistling sharply. He kicked and struggled as two goons dragged

him off the vampire.

Before Zoro and the others could get involved, Bellamy swung his gun back around and pointed it straight at Luffy's head. Usopp gasped and Nami's hands came up to her mouth.

"You trying to interrupt our fun, runt?" Bellamy hissed, moving closer to where Luffy was still held in place. The boy growled and tried to free his arms, to no avail. He was tired, hungry, and not in the best shape.

"Don't be an idiot." Luffy exclaimed, "You know that the Whitebeards are coming after us! What do you think they'll do if you *kill* one of their own!?"

"Those bastards aren't going to be a problem anymore, come tomorrow." The blonde fired back, hitting Luffy across the face with the back of his gun and making him cry out in pain. He groaned as he was dropped unceremoniously to the floor so the only thing he could make out with his splotchy vision was Bellamy's feet.

The jerk pulled him up by his hair and shook him harshly, further blurring his vision.

*"Don't get in my way."*

The last thing Luffy saw before blacking out was Bellamy firing bullet after bullet into Doma's chest, leaving him in a nauseating pool of blood.

---

When Luffy came to, his head was on Nami's lap and it felt like it had been split open.

"Shhhh..." She soothed, "You took a heavy hit...don't try to get up yet." Inclined to agree with her, he turned slightly to look around the cave, noting Zoro was outside arguing with Bellamy. Looking the other way, he saw a pool of blood, but no vampire.

"D-Doma...is he-" Nami closed her eyes and shook her head.

"They dragged him into the cave, he's probably dead by now."

Luffy inhaled slowly, eyes fluttering closed. With that, they were all dead. Even though he was liked by a lot of the vampires, there was no way they'd let them go after finding Doma's body.

"On the bright side, they did release his 'little friend'." Nami informed him, brushing hair sticky with blood out of his face, "Would you believe it was a monkey? One of Bellamy's mates had it in a bag the whole time...why would he give up his life for an animal?"

He could believe it, having met and befriended Stefan the dog. In this world, sometimes animals made better friends than people.

It took a great deal of effort to push himself up, especially since every little movement he made caused his head to spin. In seconds, Usopp was at his side, helping him out.

"Thanks." Luffy whispered, wincing in pain.

"Look who's up." Bellamy interrupted, walking back into the cave with Zoro hot on his heels. They had a brief glaring competition before the older male broke out into a cynical smirk. "Better pull yourself together, we've got a long way to go."

While everyone else worked to pack up their little camp, Luffy slowly made his way deeper into the cave. It was painful, agonizing really, but he needed to see the body...needed to see Doma. It didn't take long to find the vampire lying in an awkward position and covered in blood.

What was really heartbreaking was the little lump that whimpered on the man's chest, crying out in sorrow. Luffy stopped when the monkey hissed at him, eyes wet and full of grief. He put his hands up placatingly.

"I...I may be able to help him." Luffy whispered, glancing back to make sure no one had followed him, "Please...let me help."

The animal looked him up and down, gaze intelligent and searching. Luffy didn't move until the monkey slumped down and lowered its guard, allowing him to approach. Kneeling next to Doma, Luffy instinctively took his pulse, before he recalled that vampires didn't *have* pulses.

It was a strange phenomenon...they all had blood of their own but didn't really need it. Hell, they didn't even need to *breathe*, but most did anyway for whatever reason.

Not wasting anymore time, Luffy grabbed a somewhat sharp rock off the rocky ground and made a large cut across his left palm. Leaning over Doma, he let his blood drip into the vampire's mouth.

He knew from past experiences that though his blood was very pure and tasted pretty awful (or so he had been told), it actually wasn't poisonous like Torao thought. It was a creation of his mixed bloodline, one of his greatest secrets and defense mechanisms.

Most vampires couldn't get past the horrid taste.

'Please work, please work-' He repeated in his head, watching for any sign of movement in the vampire's limp body. Just as he was about to give up, Doma coughed, spitting out a good portion of Luffy's blood.

"No...you gotta drink it, please." Luffy whispered, putting his hand against the vampire's mouth forcefully, "I know it sucks, but it'll heal you." Thankfully, Doma was so weak he couldn't fight back. He stayed in that position for a while, until the vampire started looking better, eyes flashing a healthy scarlet as he fed.

The monkey chittered happily, rubbing its face against Doma's.

Finally, Luffy pulled back, swiftly tearing off part of his shirt to wrap around his hand. The vampire, still severely injured, looked up at him in confusion.

"...why...?"

"To protect my friends." Luffy replied, taking a moment to pet the monkey before standing up shakily, "Just...wait a bit to leave..." Doma nodded and sat up, drawing his little friend into his lap.

"I will vouch for you."

Luffy stopped at that, knowing what he was talking about. Their pursuers.

"Thanks...but hopefully you won't have to."

"You will be caught." Doma stated, eyes softening slightly, "It's inevitable. It would be in your best interest to wait here with me until they arrive." Luffy shook his head slowly as to not make himself dizzy.

"I'll take my chances."

---

Law clicked his tongue in annoyance as more sand made it through his cloak and clung to his skin. The wastes were especially dry and windy today...

His capture (or in this case, 're-capture') team was spread out in front of their three vehicles, searching the sands for any sign of their escaped humans. Unfortunately, since the humans were somehow scrambling the signal of their tags, they had to track them the old fashioned way, which was a bit more time consuming than Law would've preferred.

"I've got something!" Penguin exclaimed, calling the group over. Law jogged over to a rocky outcrop where his subordinate was standing.

"What have you found?" He asked, pushing his hood back a bit so he could see. Thankfully the rocks offered a bit of protection from the wind. Roughly camouflaged behind the formation was the stolen van, stripped down completely of its seats, weapons, and occupants. "Check the trip history and cameras, we need to figure out where they went from here."

While his subordinates worked, Law returned back to the main road, where Marco was waiting for him. The esteemed vampire was wearing attire quite unlike him: combat boots, thick pants, long-sleeve navy shirt, and a rough jacket with the hood currently flipped up over his blonde hair.

It had been a fight to keep Sabo at the citadel. The pureblood desperately wanted to accompany them to find Luffy, but it wouldn't be proper to have their new Second stomping around in the wastes. So, Marco had (very surprisingly) volunteered to go in his stead.

Refusing to leave Marco unescorted, Blenheim and Jozu accompanied them, both heavily armed and very intimidating. Law wasn't sure it would end very well though...not with Marco meeting Luffy for the first time and likely recognizing him as the boy Ace had shown them all those days ago.

He knew that the ancient vampire was already suspicious of Luffy and wouldn't be pleased to discover the boy's connection to Ace, Marco's greatest investment.

"Any luck, yoi?"

"Yeah, we found their vehicle." Law explained, "If we can compile the appropriate data from it, we may be able to determine where they went from here."

Marco nodded, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it skillfully. Watching him smoke, Law couldn't help but feel...intimidated. Though he wasn't large and bulky like his guards, Marco had an air of nobility about him. Every movement was purposeful. You wouldn't know it now, but the vampire had seen many battles and was hardly ever defeated.

"Something wrong?" The blonde asked, taking a drag. Law smirked.

"Just thinking how long it's been since you've been out in the field." Marco huffed, putting his hands in his pockets.

"Afraid I'll be rusty, yoi? You know me better than that."

Law chuckled in amusement and settled himself next to his old friend. They'd been through a lot together and he greatly respected the older vampire. Hopefully this whole business with Ace and Luffy wouldn't come between them.

He rather enjoyed Marco's steady companionship.

"Captain!" Shachi called, jogging up to them and saluting, "The cameras were pretty busted, but we got a few frames." Law nodded, expecting that. Their little escapees weren't stupid enough to not destroy their cameras.

What they didn't know was that they always had a backup hidden away, just in case the van was stolen. Granted, the backup only took stills, but it was all they had.

Marco and the others gathered around Shachi as the younger vampire pulled up the feed. True to his testament, the images were grainy and blurry. Law took control and clicked through what parts were legible until he came upon something interesting.

"There." He pointed out, tapping his claw against the screen. The picture showed the humans' backs outside the van and Hyena was pointing at something. "Penguin, get me a calculation of what direction he's pointing."

His subordinate hummed and began writing out a formula until Marco interrupted.

"West. Look at his shadow, yoi."

On closer inspection, Marco was correct.

"Good eye, we'll start there." Law said, "Let's go! We're heading west!"

At that, they all climbed back into their vehicles and started driving to where they hoped the humans were heading. They needed to find them quickly or risk an awkward confrontation with Eustass Kidd. Though Sabo did relent and stay behind, he requested they return *before* the red-haired pureblood came back from his expedition.

Unfortunately, that didn't leave them much time.

Hours later, the first van driven by Penguin suddenly stopped, forcing Jozu to slam on the brakes as well. Law immediately got out when he saw that his subordinates were scrambling out of their own van. They'd definitely seen something.

"What is it-" He stopped short when a very familiar vampire limped up to them, covered in bruises and blood, "*Doma!*" After interviewing their gate guards, they'd learned the humans had taken the brunette vampire with them.

Honestly, they'd feared the worst, especially with Hyena among them. Before he could even move, Marco was there throwing Doma's arm over his shoulder.

"M-My Lord..." The vampire whispered, wincing as they lowered him down onto a cot in the back of their second van, "Forgive me...I have troubled you." Marco shook his head.

"Don't, yoi. I know how much this little one means to you." Marco gestured to the monkey and it crawled up to his shoulder to wrap his tail around his neck. "The humans will be punished for what they've done."

As Law got to work giving the vampire first aid, Doma grabbed his arm firmly, drawing everyone's attention.

"I...I was dead."

"What?" Law exclaimed, hastily tearing the vampire's shirt open to get a better look at his wounds. True to his word, the wounds appeared fatal...but somehow, they'd healed up. Many were nearly *gone*. "How did...?"

"The little human...L-Luffy..." Doma continued, taking a moment to catch his breath, "He force-fed me his blood."

Law took a moment to process those words. He was under the impression that Luffy's blood was toxic to their kind, but it apparently had immense healing properties!? The boy's cellular properties he'd studied didn't suggest that at all.

"Why would he do that, yoi?" Marco asked, transferring the monkey back to Doma.

"...to protect his friends, apparently." The vampire said with a shrug, "That's what he said anyway. Blood tasted like crap though."

"Do you know where they went?" Blenheim put in, shouldering his large weapon. Doma huffed.

"They spoke about a hermit who could remove their tags. I imagine if you keep heading west, you'll run into them eventually."

"Thank you." Marco said, putting a hand on the other's shoulder, "Get some rest, we'll handle it from here, yoi." As Doma swiftly fell asleep, Law joined the blonde back in their own van, silence permeating as they headed out again.

"So..." Jozu stated, easily maneuvering their vehicle through the sand, "What's our plan going in? They almost killed Doma, surely you'll grant us permission to get a little...*rough* with them." Law glanced at Marco who had the most authority in their group. Ultimately, it was his decision how they handled this capture mission.

"Harming Doma was a mistake on their part." Marco replied, re-lighting his cigarette, "If possible, don't kill them, but they will definitely be punished...*severely*, yoi."

"...and Luffy-ya...?" Law put in, making Marco's eyes turn to him. He gulped as he felt the vampire's deep, scarlet gaze boring into him. The vampire was *angry*.

"I am willing to be merciful since he saved Doma's life, but he will still need to answer for his rebellion. I imagine we'll have much to discuss with him once we've returned to the citadel, yoi."

---

Luffy shuddered slightly against Zoro's back, body feeling a bit cold. That in and of itself was a bad sign considering the sun was high in the sky, beating down on them relentlessly. He nuzzled deeper into his friend's sweltering back, head pounding. Between the hard hit he'd taken and the amount of blood he'd given to Doma, Luffy knew he was in bad shape.

"Oi, you with me?" Zoro asked, readjusting him slightly.

"Y-Yeah...I'm with you..." He whispered, whining in pain and exhaustion. Luffy felt terrible that he'd become a burden to his friends, but he didn't regret saving Doma (not that he'd revealed that particular fact to anyone in their company).

"Good."

They traveled for another hour or so before Bellamy finally stopped, prompting Zoro to put Luffy down gently, still holding him firmly to keep him from falling over.

"We're here."

Their destination was skillfully camouflaged in the sand, but Luffy recognized it as a home immediately, having traveled the wastes for years himself. At first glance, it was just another large dune, but a steel door could be seen jutting out, exposed by the wind. As Bellamy's group worked to open (or break down) the door, Zoro gestured for their group to come closer.

"Listen, there's a good chance they'll try to betray us here...be on your guard." He warned, eyes steely, "If given the chance, grab a weapon." Usopp and Nami nodded, both determined. They were so close to freedom...Luffy huffed and leaned against Zoro, dizzy again. Hopefully his current weakness wouldn't inhibit them from reaching their ultimate goal.

After a few minutes of trying, to no avail, Bellamy brandished his weapon to blast it open. Luckily, someone popped out, an annoyed (and slightly fearful) look on his face.

"OI, OI! Stop with the banging would you-" The guy didn't get a chance to finish as Bellamy forced his way into the dwelling, followed closely by everyone else.

The inside of the home was relatively small, but cool and full of medicinal tools.

"Hiluluk...right?" Bellamy sneered pushing the strange old man onto his own couch, "We've got a bunch of tags for you to remove." Hiluluk growled.

"Tags? All of you!? Are you nuts! You'll lead the vampires straight here!"

At that, Luffy glanced down to his own arm, frowning. The guy was right. The second they removed the foil to do the procedure, their pursuers would know and head right for them. Bellamy just laughed.

"Then you'd better work fast, old man. Unless you want to get hurt..."

Hiluluk glared angrily up at Bellamy, teeth grinding together.

"Go ahead! I'm not risking our safety for the likes of *you*."

"Oh..." Bellamy drawled, an evil glint in his eye, "*Our*; you say." With a motion of his head, the larger male's goons began to search the home, tearing it apart. Luffy watched in horror as a young boy was dragged out from a hole in the wall, kicking and screaming.

"CHOPPER!" Hiluluk exclaimed, reaching out for the child who was now dangling in Bellamy's grip.

"I'll tell you what, we'll leave the kid alone...all you have to do is remove our tags."

"Put him down!" Luffy called hoarsely, pulling against Zoro. Bellamy smirked and squeezed the kid's neck.

"Stay out of this runt, *or else*."

Luffy hated having to back down, but with his hands around the boy's neck...there was nothing they could do. The old hermit huffed and stood up.

"Fine...I'll do it. Just don't hurt my son!"

Bellamy smirked and motioned for the man to go get his tools ready before turning towards them, throwing the boy to one of his companions. Zoro immediately growled and pushed everyone behind him.

"Aw, what's wrong? After all we've been through...don't you trust me?"

"Not at all." Zoro hissed, eyeing the blonde's other friends who had quickly surrounded them. Bellamy laughed loudly.

"Don't worry, we ain't gonna hurt you." He broke out into a cruel sneer, "So long as you do exactly what we say."

Zoro growled and threw his body into one of Bellamy's men, wrenching the gun away and pointing it menacingly at the smirking blonde.



"Easy there, tiger." Bellamy continued, motioning around them. Their smaller group was completely surrounded. "Like I said, all we want you four to do is sit quietly in the corner till we're done..."

Luffy bit his lip and backed up slowly as the barrels of very large weapons were pointed directly at his and Nami's heads. Zoro was breathing heavily, pupils blown and arms sweating. This was far from the ideal situation.

"Z-Zoro..." Usopp put in, shaking in fear, "I think we s-should do what they say." With a deep throated growl, Zoro lowered his gun, making Bellamy and his friends jeer at them. Luffy knew this was hard on him as Zoro saw himself as their group's protector, but they were outnumbered and unfortunately outmatched.

'If only I was at full strength...' Luffy lamented, 'Then maybe Zoro and I could do something!'

With weapons trained on them, they could do nothing as they were all tied up and forced into the corner of the small dwelling. His vision blurred slightly as Bellamy pat his cheek none too lightly.

"Now, why don't you four just relax over here while we get our tags removed. Once we're done, the old man can move on to you guys...or kill you, I don't really care." He chuckled darkly, "No hard feelings, we're all trying to survive out here."

With that, Bellamy moved over to Hiluluk who carefully removed the foil from his arm, ready to begin the procedure.

---

"Oi, Law!" Blenheim exclaimed, drawing his attention behind him, "Hyena's signal just came back online!"

"Let me see!"

Law took the pad from him and looked it over carefully. Just as he said, Hyena's tag was coming through bright and clear. He frowned, tracking the human's location. They'd overshot them by quite a lot.

"Contact the other drivers, we're turning around!"

As they adjusted course, Law's eyes stayed glued to the screen. If he was right, they'd only remove their protective gear if they were about to take their tags out. They needed to hurry or risk losing them to the wastes.

---

Removing tags turned out to be a complicated and long process. Just taking out Bellamy's took a good forty-five minutes. Now they were finally on his last comrade, the mean blonde girl. Next to him, Zoro growled under his breath, obviously frustrated with their continuous lack of success.

"Done." Hiluluk said as he finished sowing up the woman's arm, "Now get out."

"Aye, aye." Bellamy jeered, leading his comrades out the door, but not before stopping in front of them, "Thanks for your help Roronoa, we couldn't have done it without you."

"*Go to hell.*" Zoro spit, struggling against the rope. The blonde chuckled, waved, and was gone, leaving them behind with the old hermit and his son.

"Chopper," Hiluluk said quickly, "Go pack your things, we're leaving."

"Oi, oi what about us!?" Usopp put in, straining to get free, "You can't just leave us here!"

"You're being pursued right? Based on how many of you there are, the vampires will be here soon enough. I can't risk Chopper's safety for a bunch of strangers!" Surprising them all, Zoro bowed low to the ground, touching his forehead to the dirty floor.

"*Please...* at least do my friends. I'm begging you."

Luffy frowned, immediately hating the idea. Weren't they going to escape together? Hiluluk looked down on them sadly.

"I'm sorry boy, but I simply can't-"

"Dad." The little one, Chopper interrupted, reaching up to hold the hermit's hand, "You... aren't going to leave them...right? You're a doctor, you save people." Hiluluk stuttered, eyes watering slightly.

"I-I...I mean-"

"Dad." Chopper insisted, eyes big and cheeks puffed out.

"All right *fine*...for you." Hiluluk relented, jogging over with a knife to saw at their binds, "No guarantees I'll make it in time though."

"We are in your debt." Zoro replied, throwing the now snapped rope away. Usopp and Nami helped Luffy up and over to the couch where they waited restlessly for the old hermit to start. Bellamy had taken up a lot of their time and their pursuers could show up any minute.

---

Initially, deciding who would go first was a challenge. Zoro immediately volunteered to go last, much to everyone's annoyance (they all knew how much freedom meant to him). Eventually, they decided to go in order of who would be *least likely* to be killed if the vampires did catch up to them: Zoro, Usopp, Luffy, and then Nami.

While Zoro was having his tag removed, Luffy and Nami worked to help Chopper pack up the little family's things. Usopp sat at the old man's computer, watching the ground sensors Hiluluk had set up.

It was a convenient system, warning them a few hours before vehicles would arrive at their location. The only weakness of the sensors was that it wouldn't pick up humans or vampires

on foot, just heavier machines.

An hour and a half later, it was finally Luffy's turn. He eagerly padded up to the hermit's chair, leaning on Zoro's bandaged arm for support.

"Let's see..." Hiluluk muttered, gently taking Luffy's arm and placing it under some sort of x-ray machine. He messed with a few dials and palpated the slightly raised skin for a few minutes before inhaling sharply.

"W-What is it?" Luffy asked, suddenly nervous. Hiluluk frowned and gave him his arm back.

"We've run into a bit of a problem, lad..."

"Spit it out." Zoro demanded, coming up beside Luffy.

"Before I say anything...young lady, could you come here please?" Hiluluk requested, swiftly taking a look at her arm as well. Once he was done, he sighed and removed his glasses. "You two, did a skilled doctor insert your tags?"

Nami and Luffy glanced at each other.

"Yeah...Trafalgar did mine...you too, right Luffy?" He nodded. Luffy's memory of being tagged was flimsy, but it had definitely been Torao.

"Unfortunately, both of your tags have been inserted in such a way that a more invasive procedure is required." The hermit explained seriously, "I *can* remove them, but it'll take almost two hours to do each surgery."

"T-Two hours!?" Nami exclaimed, "What makes ours so different?"

"The placement." Hiluluk continued, "One wrong cut and I'll sever an artery."

Luffy looked down at his hands as his friends began to argue with the strange doctor. Depending how far away their pursuers were, maybe they could still make it-

"O-Oi!" Usopp interrupted, pointing at the computer screen, "We've got a new problem!" Everyone scurried over to look at the curly-haired teen was pointing at and froze.

There on the screen were five blinking dots, all moving fast...and straight towards them. Three were coming from the northeast while the other two were coming from their opposite side. Their escape window was quickly closing.

"How much time do we have?" Zoro asked, turning to Hiluluk who had also rushed over.

"Based on their current speed...two and a half hours."

Everyone went silent, knowing what that meant. There was only time for the hermit to do one surgery. Luffy found himself trembling slightly. This wasn't how their escape was supposed to go...Bellamy had forced them into this situation.

But there was no time to think about it. He knew what to do.

"I'll stay."

"What!? Don't be ridiculous!" Zoro exclaimed, grabbing him by the shoulders, "We'll all escape, like we promised!" Luffy pushed the other's hands off him.

"You know as well as I do that we don't have time for this!" He turned to Hiluluk, "Get ready to take out Nami's tag, *please*." The doctor hesitated at first, but nodded and jogged into the other room after a determined look from Luffy. Beside him, Nami was in tears.

"N-No...Luffy, you should-"

"*Nami*." He interrupted, bringing her into a slow hug (still mindful of his injuries), "I want to stay. It's okay." She sobbed into his chest, shaking like a leaf, until it was time for her surgery to commence just a few minutes later.

Luffy sat with Zoro and Usopp in silence as they waited for what felt like days for Hiluluk to finish. No one said a word.

Finally, Nami re-entered the room, holding her bandaged arm tightly.

"It's done."

Everyone moved around the small dwelling, gathering their things in a deep melancholy that Luffy couldn't stand. Chuckling lightly, he pulled his legs up onto the couch where he'd decided to wait for his pursuers to catch up.

"Shishishi, don't worry! I'll be fine."

At that, his friends broke down and lunged to hug him, holding him close. Luffy smiled and returned their embrace, so happy he'd had a chance to make such great friends. Chopper trotted up and hugged him too, giving him a little reindeer toy 'for good luck'.

Naturally, Luffy gratefully accepted.

Once everyone had stepped outside, he was left alone with Zoro. The older teen knelt down and pulled Luffy close, making him giggle weakly. The ever serious and tough Zoro...finally giving him a hug.

"...you mad at me?"

"No. I respect your decision." Zoro whispered, not letting go, "Listen, Luffy. We will come for you. I promise."

"What if they kill me?" Luffy whispered back, melting into his friend's warm arms, knowing he would miss the feeling.

"They won't, not after you saved that vampire's life."

"Shishishi..." He chuckled, opening his eyes, "You caught me." Of all his friends, Zoro was the most observant. Luffy figured he'd noticed him slipping away.

"Idiot." Zoro admonished, letting him go to flick him lightly on the forehead, "You should've told us."

"Didn't wanna."

His friend huffed and ruffled his hair, leaning in to meet Luffy's gaze.

"We *will* rescue you, Luffy, so please don't die before then."

"Aye, aye."

With that, Zoro left, leaving him alone in the underground home. Now that everyone was gone, Luffy curled up on the couch, hugging himself tightly in an attempt to stop his trembling. The foil was gone, leaving his tag signal free and unobscured.

They would come for him soon enough.

Luffy couldn't help but be a bit frightened of what would happen to him. As he was the only one left, there was a good chance everyone's punishment would fall upon him. But, for his friends, there wasn't anything he wouldn't do.

Taking another shaky breath, Luffy glanced to the computer screen, noting the vehicles as they approached. They would be there within the hour.

The minutes crawled by, prompting him to mess around a bit with the toy Chopper had left him. It was a bit ratty and kind of falling apart but had an awesome pink hat that Luffy thought was pretty cool. Would the vampires let him keep it?

After what felt like ages, the ground above him shook showering sand down on his head. Luffy flinched when he heard (and felt) car doors closing, the vibrations reverberating through his small body. They were here.

It didn't take long for the metal door above him to come crashing down, making him curl up even more on the couch. Though he was scared, he wanted to face them with some semblance of dignity, so he sat up, still holding the reindeer in his arms.

However, when the vampires themselves dropped in, Luffy immediately realized something was different.

'W-Who're these guys?' He thought, glancing down to their uniforms.

That was NOT the mark of Whitebeard.

# Chapter 13

## Chapter Notes

Okay ya'll...I hope you're ready for this one. This chapter is dark, like REALLY dark. 0\_0 (remember that 'graphic depictions of violence' tag) We're going to get a good look at what another vampire group is like, and it's not pretty. For those of you holding out for more fluff/bonding, don't worry, it shall soon return ;)

Here's some additional warnings just for this chapter:

- Gore
- Death/corpses
- Leering
- Nakedness
- Non-progressive vampire/human relations

Luffy tensed as the vampires, a total of three, approached him. He'd been fully prepared to face Torao or even Sabo's wrath, but these were complete strangers! Which citadel were they from?

The emblem on their uniform was that of a large tree...a mark Luffy wasn't familiar with; but based on their current location, it was most likely a citadel that bordered the city.

"Hmph...just one straggler, huh?" A vampire with sunglasses growled, looking him over with a critical eye, "The Master won't be pleased."

"And whose fault is that?" Another one with a mustache exclaimed while kicking over a table, making Luffy jump, "We HAD a good group, until you killed most of them."

"They were not good enough to represent the Master." Glasses-guy replied firmly, never taking his eyes off Luffy, "Search the area, we won't stay long." At that, the vampire stepped forward and grabbed him by the throat, dragging him up off the couch.

He instinctively dropped the reindeer and clawed at the powerful arm holding him up. As Luffy fought to breathe, the glasses-guy hummed and used his other hand to literally *rip* his shirt off.

"Tch...male." The vampire grumbled, "Damn, with that stature, I thought for sure you'd be female." Luffy gasped, trying to keep from passing out. But even in his mental fog and intense pain, he glared at the creature holding him.

Just because he was short and skinny did NOT mean he was a woman. What a jerk!

"Nobody else is here." The third vampire stated while coming up next to Luffy's captor, "What should we do? If we don't find adequate offerings..."

"I know. Unfortunately, this one will have to do." The vampire with glasses dropped him on the ground just before his vision went completely black, "He's no female, but is pretty enough. Put him with the others."

Luffy's intense coughing fit was interrupted by a strong grip hauling him to his feet, almost sending him back to the floor when his vision blurred with dizziness. A vampire caught him in a crushing grip, not gentle at all despite his obvious injuries.

The one holding him was the man with the mustache who swiftly drew his arms behind his back in a very painful hold. What really scared Luffy was that his necklace was out for all to see. Yet, for whatever reason, these guys didn't seem to care.

Before he could be dragged out of the dwelling, his captor stopped and ran a claw over the raised skin of his tag.

"Oi, Ohm, this one's tagged."

The glasses-guy, Ohm apparently, walked over to see for himself and frowned. Luffy yelped as the vampire grabbed his face roughly, forcing him to look up and see his own reflection in the glasses.

"Who do you belong to?"

Luffy gulped, feeling the vampire's claws digging into his cheeks. While he had no desire to say he was owned, *by anyone*, if that would keep him out of whatever these guys had planned...

"W-Whitebeard..." Luffy managed, wincing as the grip on his face tightened, "I belong to Whitebeard!" Ohm clicked his tongue and released him, mouth curling up into a scowl.

"*Phoenix*, huh. What a pain."

"From what I hear, the Moby Dick's under new management." The one holding Luffy put in, "It's about time they booted that dirty *un-pure* out."

"They are still inferior to the Master, new pureblood Lord or not." Ohm continued, turning towards the door, "We're moving out."

"...and the human?"

"Take him. We'll deal with the tag later." The vampire said, making Luffy's eyes widen. He wasn't terribly knowledgeable about vampire law, but every human knew that to be tagged was to be marked as property. They were essentially stealing from another citadel!

Did these vampires not fear retribution against their so-called 'Master'?

"Er...but-"

"Do not question me, *Shura*." Ohm interrupted, "You know as well as I do that this is an important meeting for the Master. It will be a yet another step to elevate his status. However, if we do not do our part and provide high quality humans..."

And that was where the argument ended.

Luffy was unceremoniously carried out of the dwelling, thrown over the vampire Shura's shoulder. Out in the wastes again, this time without a shirt, was immediately painful...his exposed skin receiving the intense rays of the sun directly.

"Say, Ohm." Shura said, readjusting Luffy's wriggling body effortlessly, "You don't think this human's scars will be problem...do you? I mean, he's far from perfection."

"It adds to his uniqueness." The other vampire replied quickly, "Don't worry about it...we can always cover them up if need be."

Luffy wasn't liking where this was heading. Whatever citadel these vampires were from was obviously a lot less progressive than the Whitebeards, and apparently indulged in dolling up their humans like pets...*or worse*. They'd mentioned 'offerings' of some kind, which didn't sound pleasant at all.

When the vehicles came into view, Luffy was dumped onto the sand uncaringly while the vampires worked to unlock a cage nestled in the bed of the closer truck. It wasn't terribly large, probably only fitting about five people at a time. He thought to run but stopped short when he got a good look at the other occupants of the cage.

There were two women, one who looked very familiar. Luffy gulped as he recognized the mean, blonde lady who'd been traveling with Bellamy. If she was here, where was the rest of the group? He'd assumed they'd be long gone by now.

In contrast to her usual smirk, she looked terrified. There was blood all over her arms and what meager clothing she had was now completely gone. After a quick glance, the other woman was naked as well. What the hell happened to them?

"Yama, dump the trash here."

The larger vampire nodded and opened the back of the other truck. Luffy's nose immediately scrunched up as a horrid stench wafted towards him. What did they have-

Luffy's face paled at what was revealed under the tarp.

Bodies. *Corpses of humans*.

Every single one decapitated.

Luffy gagged and brought a hand up to his face in horror. The bodies were bloody and mutilated beyond recognition. Above him, the vampire Shura chuckled.

"OI, don't forget to get rid of the heads too! We won't have time to take them back to the citadel."



One by one, the bodies were dragged away and dumped outside of Hiluluk and Chopper's home. Once all of them (a total of five) were out of the truck, Yama grabbed a bag full of...  
*oh Lord...*

Luffy swallowed the bile in his throat as they were all rolled out in front of them. One in particular landed face up, revealing the frozen, empty gaze of Bellamy.

'W-Were they ambushed?' He thought, lip shaking as he stared down at the head, 'Why would they kill all of them!?''

"Confused...?" Shura sneered, grabbing Luffy by the hair and hauling him to his feet, "These guys were in your group, right? Too bad for them, they weren't good enough to keep alive, so Ohm *freed* them."

Luffy was starting to understand what happened. These vampires had attacked Bellamy's group while out on a hunt but had only left the blonde lady alive. For whatever reason, they only wanted 'high quality' humans for some sort of...ritual? Offering? They must've mentioned Luffy and his friends, which led them straight to him.

Still, he didn't think any vampire would pass up five young and healthy humans...blood slaves were generally very valuable, regardless of their disposition.

"Our Master isn't interested in humans who aren't beautiful...or at least unique in some way." Ohm stated, closing the bed of the truck, "Anything less than that would be an insult to his perfection."

Luffy wasn't given a chance to retort as Shura pulled him over to the cage and roughly stripped him of what clothing he had left. Now completely naked, he was shoved in with the other two women, hitting his head on the bars in the process.

He immediately sat up and held his pendant close, the only thing left of his dignity at this point. Shura smirked at him, locked the cage, and pulled some sort of tarp over them, leaving them in simulated darkness.

Luffy bit his lip and curled into a corner to get comfortable as the truck started up, glancing to his two new cell mates. The blonde woman was shaking and staring down at her legs with wide, terror filled eyes. When he tried to talk to her, she didn't respond...just kept muttering to herself.

The other lady had dark hair pulled up in a ponytail and met his gaze silently, refusing to say a word.

Since the other humans wouldn't speak to him, Luffy focused on how he could escape. Unfortunately, the situation was bleak. Though he wasn't cuffed or anything, being without any clothing was a huge issue. Even if he was to miraculously escape, he would be dead in a few days.

In the wastes, the elements were just as dangerous as the vampires. Plus, since he was still tagged, no other humans would help him. Luffy was on his own.

That brought him to the only other option: waiting for the Whitebeards to catch up. From what he remembered on Hiluluk's screen, the group of three vehicles had to be Torao and whoever else was with him.

At this point, anyone was better than these vampires...even if he would still be punished for running away.

That is, if he survived whatever was in store for them.

---

Law held his pad tightly, lip curling up in frustration with every dot that disappeared. At the rate they were going, all the humans would be without tags and out of their hands. How annoying!

No one in the van spoke as the last four dots began to disappear.

Marimo...gone...Pachinko...gone.

Then, there was a bit of a wait, and Mikan disappeared. Law suspected they had trouble extracting her tag due to its placement. He purposefully inserted them in a way that was difficult to remove (except by him of course) for situations like this.

Law was starting to regret only doing that for a select few...and Luffy of course.

He waited for the small human's signal to vanish...but, surprisingly, it remained. Not long after Mikan's was removed, the boy's signal came through even stronger, indicating he'd removed whatever was interfering with the tag.

"What's he up to..." Law muttered, drawing Marco's attention.

"How many are left, yoi?"

"One." He replied, turning the pad around, "Luffy-ya. It appears he's given up." At first, Law suspected the little human was getting his procedure done, but with no change (or even a blip in the tag's wavelength) and their fast pursuit, perhaps he'd seen reason and decided to stop running.

"Then, let's go get him."

They continued in silence once more, Law ever watchful of Luffy's signal. Thankfully, now that the interference was gone, he could monitor the boy's vital signs. From what he could tell, the kid was okay-

Suddenly, Luffy's heart rate spiked along with his oxygen levels, so much so that the pad beeped in warning.

"What is it, yoi?" Marco asked, immediately standing and moving so he could see. Law frowned in concern.

"Something's wrong. Based on this physiological response...he's afraid. *Very* afraid." He tapped on Luffy's profile and brought up the rest of his information, revealing adrenaline and vasoconstriction. "I think he's being attacked; we need to hurry!"

Jozu stepped on the gas, but when they were about thirty minutes out, Luffy's tag began to move, much quicker than he should be able to on foot.

"He's in a vehicle!" Law hissed, "Did someone beat us to him!?"

After what felt like ages, they finally arrived at their destination. They knew Luffy was no longer there, but the sight of multiple bodies outside of the dwelling was enough to ensure a delay. Law knelt down beside what used to be Hyena and looked over the body with sharp eyes.

A few feet away, Marco did the same, analyzing the kills.

"Brutal..." Blenheim whispered, "Who would waste perfectly good food like this?"

Law hummed, unsure. Though they tended to be difficult, those five were perfectly healthy human specimens, excellent candidates for any vampire's collection. Another thing he noted was that the fair-haired female (whose name he couldn't recall at the moment) was also missing.

Someone had taken her and Luffy but killed the others.

"The dwelling's empty." Penguin reported, "We *did* find some tracks leading in the opposite direction. After scanning them, we identified them as belonging to Marimo, Pachinko, and Mikan...looks like the three of them escaped the massacre."

'It's as I thought...' Law mused, standing up, 'Something happened that made them leave Luffy-ya behind.'

"Good work. Take Shachi-ya and bury the bodies, we're going after Luffy-ya." As everyone ran around following his orders, Law approached Marco, who appeared deep in thought. "What do you make of this?"

The older vampire frowned and scanned the bodies once again.

"My first thought was a feral, yoi." Marco said, voice low, "But they don't generally take prisoners."

"A rogue perhaps?"

"Maybe, but I think it's more likely to be a hunting party with...particular tastes." The blonde vampire turned to point at nearby tire tracks, "They came prepared. There's also this..." Marco led Law over past the bodies to where a pile of clothing lay innocently on the sand.

He quickly snatched up the tattered cloth and read the identification number on the inside of what used to be shorts.

"These are Luffy-ya's! Did they...strip him?" Marco nodded and lit a cigarette.

"There's only one citadel I know of that takes their humans naked and tends to focus on women, yoi."

*"Upper Yard."* Law hissed, clutching the cloth tightly in his fist. Those particular vampires rubbed him the wrong way, always quick to kill their humans when they outlived their usefulness or weren't pretty enough to display. "But he's still tagged! Surely they know what will happen if they steal from us!"

Marco blew out smoke and turned back towards their vans.

"They *will* know, yoi. Let's go...we need to catch up to him before they inflict damage on that child that can't be reversed."

---

The ride to wherever they were being taken to was surprisingly short, which was odd. Luffy was pretty sure there were no citadels this close to the Whitebeard's territory. Though the tarp obscured their vision, he wiggled his hand out of the bars to lift it up a little, trying to take a peek of where they were.

Unfortunately, the truck bed kept him from seeing anything but sand outside of their prison.

'Those vampires did mention not going back to their citadel...' Luffy thought, plopping back down in between the two ladies, 'So, maybe we're at an outpost or something?'

A few minutes later, he began to hear voices outside of the truck. They had stopped briefly, but now they were moving again, albeit at a much slower pace. The atmosphere hadn't changed, so they definitely weren't in a citadel.

Suddenly, the tarp was ripped off, making Luffy and the two women hide their faces. It was so bright! The vampires didn't wait till their eyes adjusted to drag them out of the cage and back onto the sand.

Luffy blinked continuously, trying to make out the blurry shapes around him while his hands were tied in front of him with coarse rope. When his eyes had finally adjusted to the sun's light, he looked around, swallowing nervously.

It was definitely some sort of outpost with a large stone building in the center. Encompassing the whole area were large, spiked walls and a metal gate that the vehicles could come through. There were a lot of vampires around, all with the same tree emblem somewhere on their clothing.

"Walk." Ohm ordered, pulling the three humans along towards the main building. Luffy stumbled a bit but managed to catch himself before he fell.

The inside of the compound was cool and provided great relief to his burning skin. They were immediately dragged off to the right, past room after room and earning some sultry glances from passing vampires.

Luffy could only hope they'd give them some sort of clothing...he didn't fancy being naked in a place like this.

Finally, Ohm entered a room at the end of a hallway. The inside was full of pretty fabrics and even had a bubbling tub on the opposite wall. What made Luffy's stomach drop were the other humans already there, getting scrubbed viciously and dressed in minuscule clothing that barely hung onto their bodies.

He'd heard horror stories about citadels like this...but never imagined he'd have to witness it firsthand.

"Ohm, you've returned! Ho, ho hooooo!" A very strange, round vampire exclaimed, skipping over to them, "A little late though, the Charlotte Family's representative has already been here for an hour. The Master's entertaining him until you bring out the offerings."

"We had some trouble finding suitable humans." Ohm replied, pushing Luffy and the others forward, "Get them ready as fast as possible, Satori."

"Ho, ho hooooo, of course!"

"Oh, also," Ohm continued, grabbing Luffy by his arm, "This one's tagged, and I need it gone before we present him."

Satori hummed and sidled up to get a closer look at his arm, making Luffy turn away in disgust. The vampire smelled like he'd slathered his entire body in perfume! It was enough to bring back his earlier dizziness.

"Hmmm...this placement...one of Whitebeard's?" Satori asked, adjusting his glasses, "Well, I'll do my best, no promises though." Ohm growled and grabbed the round vampire by his shirt.

*"Get it done. We can't present a stolen human...not to that family. They'll rebuke the Master!"*

"I know, but the Whitebeards have many skilled doctors." Satori replied calmly, "We may not be able to remove it here."

Luffy glanced up nervously at Ohm, noting how his eyes were turning scarlet behind his glasses. The vampire shook Satori and brought him to his face, only inches away from his teeth.

"I don't care what you have to do, but there can be no evidence of him being from another citadel...*understand?*"

"O-Of course."

"Good." Ohm said, suddenly back to normal, "In the meantime, I'll take the women as soon as they're ready. It wouldn't do to keep the Master waiting any longer."

Luffy gulped as the two ladies were led away and Satori clamped a large hand around his upper arm with a dark chuckle.

"Ho, ho hooooo, always so serious. Now, let's see what we can do about that tag of yours..."

---

Katakuri was annoyed.

It was just like Mama to send him out to the boonies to listen to some no-name pureblood's petition to join their family which, unfortunately, was a pretty common occurrence. The Charlotte Family was of noble blood and offered many benefits for those who would swear fealty to Mama and her ideals.

But, out of all the citadel Lords he'd interviewed, this one was by far the *worst*.

"-and that's how I came to be worshiped. Quite an entertaining story, is it not?" Enel laughed, reclining on a cushion like some sort of lush. Katakuri watched in distaste as the man lowered grapes into his mouth and chewed loudly.

"Indeed..." Honestly, how much longer was he going to have to stay here? Enel had promised an offering for Mama, which he couldn't just leave behind, but he was beginning to think facing Mama's wrath was better than sitting through another one of this idiot's tales.

To add insult to injury, Enel had refused to meet him at his own citadel, instead requesting (*demanding*) Katakuri make the longer trek out to his 'human processing' outpost. He suspected the vampire wanted to present *fresh* humans or something to that effect.

Not anything he hadn't heard before.

Besides, he's already decided Enel was NOT a good fit for the Charlotte Family. His ego was too large, and he would without doubt try to claw his way up the ladder. Katakuri feared he would one day try to challenge Mama for her throne, something that was completely unacceptable.

But he didn't want to have come all this way for nothing. Hopefully the humans presented would be enough to quell Mama's thirst for a little while.

Just as he finished that thought, there was a knock at the door and two humans were forced inside. Katakuri immediately raised an eyebrow at their scandalous attire.

"Ah, thank you, Ohm!" Enel crooned, grabbing the chains attached to the females' collars, "Though...I believe I requested *three*, did I not?"

"You did, Master." The vampire replied, kneeling before him, "The third is being prepared as we speak and should join us shortly."

"Excellent." Enel exclaimed, grabbing the blonde woman's hair to pull her up closer to him, "What do you think, my Lord? Quite beautiful specimens, yes? I imagine they will serve your family well."

Katakuri wasn't sure what to say. Though humans were without doubt an inferior species, he didn't particularly agree with how Enel dealt with them. It didn't feel right to strip them so completely of their dignity.

He replied with a sound of affirmation, if only to stop the conversation from going any further.

They spent the next forty five minutes or so in awkward silence while Enel messed around with the humans, forcing them to feed him and other such degrading acts. Back home, some of his siblings treated their humans poorly, but well enough that they would generally live out their lives.

Katakuri couldn't help but wonder if this was why Enel had to send out so many hunting parties. It was terribly inefficient and a disastrous waste of food.

As the sun went down, he decided it was time for him to leave. He'd had just about enough of this pompous fool and his annoying habits. But as he went to stand, Enel stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"Leaving already? We haven't seen your third offering yet!"

Ah, yes...there were three.

"Bring them out then, it is time I rejoined my family."

Enel went to reply but stopped short when one of his servants rushed into the room looking quite flustered.

"You DARE interrupt me!?"

"F-Forgive me, Master," The servant stuttered, bowing low, "but it's an emergency!"

Enel sighed.

"Very well, what is it?"

"A group of Whitebeards are at the gate, demanding to see you!" At that, Enel's eyes narrowed and Katakuri sat up a little straighter. What were Whitebeards doing here? They generally kept to themselves.

"What do they want? I'm busy!"

"W-Well..." The servant took a deep breath, "They claim you've stolen from them, Sir."

As Enel spluttered and tried to maintain his cool head, Katakuri cracked a smile under his scarf. Finally, this ridiculous interview was getting interesting.

---

Law stood at the gate of the compound with his nodachi resting against his shoulder menacingly. He'd brought it just in case and was now glad he did. Beside him, Marco was unarmed, but equally intimidating with a smoking cigarette in between his teeth.

He supposed, in retrospect, they did make a pretty scary bunch, but that was kind of the point.

"Oi, they're coming back out." Blenheim whispered, making Jozu straighten up as well. A sniveling servant exited and bowed deeply.

"Pray, forgive the wait. My Master bids you welcome to his humble-"

"Enough of the pleasantries, yoi." Marco interrupted, fixing the shaking vampire with a harsh stare, "Take us to Enel."

They followed the servant inside and got some strange looks from the warriors gathered there, but that was to be expected. Law hefted his sword up and stole a glance down at his pad. Luffy's heart rate and blood pressure was severely elevated, as it had been since they'd discovered the boy had been kidnapped.

If he'd been injured...there'd be hell to pay.

After a bit of walking, they entered a large room, where Enel was reclining. What surprised him was the other pureblood in the room, a big name amongst the nobility.

"Katakuri, yoi." Marco greeted, bowing slightly, "This is a surprise."

"Yes..." Katakuri replied, inclining his head, "How fortunate that our paths should cross once more. I am curious as to what you have to say."

In Law's mind, having a Charlotte there was in their favor. Especially since it appeared that whatever he was discussing with Enel wasn't going particularly well. His eyes darted to the pureblood's feet and narrowed in recognition. The bastard had definitely stolen two of their humans, though they couldn't claim the woman anymore, not without a tag.

"*Phoenix*...what brings you to see me?" Enel sneered, forcing a smile (probably trying to be somewhat cordial to make a good impression on Katakuri).

"We are here to retrieve a human you've stolen, yoi." Marco stated, motioning for Law to hand him the pad, which he did, "As you can see, he is obviously here." Both Katakuri and Enel leaned in for a closer look, the former frowning and turning to the smaller pureblood.

"Explain yourself."

"You must be mistaken!" Enel scoffed, plopping back onto his cushion, "I know the law-"

"-and have a history of ignoring it, yoi." Marco interrupted, "That boy is our property and I suggest you return him immediately."

---

Luffy cried out in pain as yet another incision was made on his right arm. The round vampire and a few of his subordinates had taken him to a separate room and were trying their hardest to remove his tag.

He was strapped to a table with his right arm extended and, currently, in large amounts of pain. At this point, they'd tried to go in from the palmar side, only to run into arteries. Now, they were trying to get it from the other side.



"Damn!" Satori exclaimed, throwing his bloody scalpel onto the ground, "This isn't working!"

"W-What should we do, Sir?" A vampire asked, "This human was supposed to be presented to the Charlotte Family representative quite a while ago!"

Luffy blinked as his consciousness began to fade. His arm was starting to go numb...and if he glanced over, it was completely red with blood. That wasn't good. The vampires were saying something, and machines started to whir around him, but all Luffy wanted to do was pass out.

The only comfort he had was the coolness of his pendant on his naked chest.

"-are you sure!?"

"Yes, yes, just do it! I don't see any other way to get rid of the evidence!"

Luffy's head rolled to the right to see what they were doing, and his eyes went wide with shock. No...they wouldn't...

He had just enough time to open his mouth in protest before the instrument came down with a sickening sound.

Luffy screamed.

---

Law scowled at Enel as the pureblood continued to argue with them. He was stubborn in his refusal to let them search for Luffy.

"-you don't have the right to-"

"-oh, we'll go, with or without permission-"

Marco was giving it back to Enel in a way that was very entertaining to watch, but they didn't have time for this. Just as Law was about to intervene, the pad beeped in warning once again. He held it up to check, just as a *spine chilling scream* tore through the air.

Everyone froze, even Enel.

Law immediately took off in the direction of the voice, recognizing it as Luffy's. Something had happened! It wasn't terribly difficult to locate the room, and he burst in, breathing hard.

"Luffy-ya-" Law's voice caught in his throat. He tuned out the other vampires telling him to get out and focused solely on the boy strapped to the table.

First, he was naked and covered in bruises.

Second, he had a terrible black eye.

Third, and likely the cause of his scream...his arm had been completely severed.

"Oh crap." Blenheim whispered, coming up behind him as Law rushed forward.

"Luffy-ya, stay with me!" He exclaimed, removing his jacket to try and stem the bleeding coming from the stump. The incision wasn't very clean, and blood flowed all over the floor (and Law). They'd cut it off just above the elbow.

"What the hell?" Jozu added as Marco appeared in the doorway.

"THESE BASTARDS CUT OFF HIS ARM!" Law yelled, trying to desperately make the bleeding stop, "Marco-ya, I need help!" The older vampire immediately rushed over and took Luffy's pulse.

But then he stopped, eyes widening quickly.

"Law, yoi. We have another problem"

At first, he was unsure what the older vampire meant, until he focused on Luffy's face. The boy was still awake, crying, and breathing heavily, but that wasn't what drew their attention.

He had his pendant in his mouth.

For anyone else, that wouldn't be anything to get concerned about, but Luffy was a D, and he currently held the key to jumpstarting his abilities between his teeth.

## Chapter 14

Luffy was in so much pain.

His body was cold and though he could hear voices around him, all he could focus on was the feeling missing from below his right elbow. It was reminiscent of when he'd been trapped deep inside the earth, a prisoner of *that* vampire, and had gained the scar on his chest after days of agony.

Luffy felt himself move automatically, naturally.

He lifted his head up off the table and maneuvered his pendant into his mouth. It was strange to roll it between his teeth and gums, knowing what would happen if he bit down hard enough. His father had warned him about only using it as a last resort.

But...wasn't this as good a time as any? Luffy was alone and being tortured in *enemy territory*, he had no choice.

Even so, he felt himself hesitating. If he did this, there was a chance he'd die anyway...and what if someone *did* show up-

"Luffy-ya." A deep voice whispered soothingly, breaking him out of his trance-like state, "Look at me."

Luffy sniffled and whined, vision blurry from tears. Was someone there? He flinched as cold hands settled on his cheeks, massaging them gently.

"It's okay...you're going to be okay." That voice...was it...Torao? Blinking to clear up his wet eyes, Luffy focused on the person hovering over him. He sobbed when he finally recognized the tall vampire.

'T-They came...' Luffy thought, savoring the cool touch on his face as a way to distract himself from whatever was happening with his arm. He never thought he'd be so happy to see a vampire. Torao held his face tightly, keeping him face up and unable to look at his arm.

"That's it, come back to me." He crooned, "Look at me, don't worry about anything else." The vampire's ministrations were calming and helped Luffy relax as much as he could, though he didn't release his pendant.

Not yet, what if-

"Luffy-ya, will you spit that out...*please*." Torao whispered, tugging slightly on the chain jutting out of both sides of his mouth, "There's no need for it anymore, we're going to take care of you."

He shook his head vigorously, making the vampire frown slightly. This was his only defense mechanism right now. He'd been beaten, exposed, and humiliated. If this would give him the

ability to defend himself and survive another day, then he couldn't just let it go.

"If you go through with this," The tattooed vampire warned, "we won't be able to take you back. Please, Luffy-ya..."

*It's okay.*

*We'll take care of you.*

*Trust us.*

*Just...let go.*

Luffy whimpered and sniffled, but slowly opened his mouth, nonetheless. Torao swiftly pulled the necklace out while whispering reassurances. He wanted to fight back as the vampire removed it completely from his neck, but he was too weak and utterly exhausted.

His arm felt like it was on fire, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

---

Katakuri watched in silence as Marco and Trafalgar worked to stabilize the human. His eyes glanced down to the floor where the youth's arm lay, innocent to the pain its original was in.

He'd observed closely as Trafalgar attempted to coax the little one into releasing his trigger, something that had the whole room on edge. Katakuri knew all too well what would happen if that sphere was broken, having fought D's before.

From what he understood, it contained a powerful accelerant that would activate the human's dormant blood, giving them unimaginable power...at a price, of course. In a D this young, it would probably destroy his body in the process.

Katakuri had known of D's who'd mastered their power, but it took time and relentless training. Trying to obtain it too quickly would end in disaster for everyone involved.

Apparently, Enel and his lackeys had no idea what they'd brought into their compound. Uneducated fools.

It actually didn't surprise him that this boy was a D, considering Whitebeard's history with the clan. What DID surprise him was that he recognized the human...from many years ago, when he'd pulled a tiny pup out of the ground and freed him from his captor on a whim.

'To think, he was a D...' Katakuri mused, stepping forward when the boy finally passed out, unable to take the pain anymore.

At this point, Marco had expertly applied a tourniquet of sorts to the child's arm, bringing the constant flow of blood to a stop. Meanwhile, Trafalgar fussed over the human, taking a blanket from one of his subordinates to bundle the boy in.

"I need to do surgery right away." The doctor stated, "Otherwise, his arm may get infected." Phoenix nodded and marched up to Enel, covered in blood. One look at him made the

pureblood shy away, face curling in disgust.

"We need to use your infirmary, yoi. Where is it?"

"Hah!?" Enel exclaimed, "You can't be serious. He's just a human-"

Marco didn't let him finish and slammed him against the wall with such force that it cracked.

"Where. Is. It?" Enel glared, eyes flashing red.

"Get your damn hands off me, *un-pure*. I will not allow members of a different citadel to waste precious medical supplies on a human whelp!"

Katakuri, recognizing that the situation was escalating, grabbed Marco and pulled him off the other vampire. While Enel was undoubtedly at fault for this situation, he wasn't about to let two powerful vampires brawl in front of him.

*"Enough of this!"* He bellowed, making everyone bow away from him. Now that he had everyone's attention, Katakuri continued, fixing Enel with a harsh stare, "I hope you realize that by stealing another citadel's human, you've broken one of our cardinal laws."

"I-I had no idea-"

"I DON'T CARE." Katakuri snapped with a snarl, "Give them access to your medical resources and I shall consider giving you a warning for this...*misstep*."

Honestly, he should report the pureblood. Knowingly or not, he had taken a human that was tagged as the Whitebeards' property.

Enel's expression changed to one of fear and then annoyance, but Katakuri knew the pureblood would yield. After all, his acceptance into the Charlotte Family was at stake.

"Very well but be quick about it."

---

Marco worked to light yet another cigarette as he waited outside of the small infirmary he and Law had jerry-rigged into an operating room. Unfortunately, their supplies were minimal, and they certainly had no surgical equipment, forcing Law to make do with what he had.

He'd offered Trafalgar his assistance, but the vampire had declined. Marco took a deep drag, knowing in his heart that Law blamed himself for this whole mess and the fact that the human's arm wouldn't be able to be reattached.

The harsh truth was they were too far away from a proper facility to do the sensitive surgery required to fuse the muscle and nerves back together again. It was all they could do to ensure the boy remained healthy and survived the staggering amount of blood he'd lost.

"Care for one, yoi?" Marco offered, glancing to his left where Katakuri sat, seemingly lost in thought.

"No thank you, I don't smoke."

Marco hummed and blew smoke out slowly. What a strange situation they'd found themselves in...all over a single human child who was a D of all things. Of course, there were other implications, some he'd noticed immediately upon recognizing the boy.

This was the human Ace had shown them during his scouting of the colony many weeks before, meaning he probably had something to do with his appearance in their citadel. Marco recalled his conversation with Thatch about how the fledgling's seal was weakening and if the human boy, who now had a name, had something to do with it.

He was now certain they were connected and would need to speak with Ace upon their return. If the fledgling regained his memories, it could be disastrous.

"Thank you for your help back there." He said, inclining his head. Katakuri nodded.

"You're welcome, though I must say, I didn't expect you to be so attached to a human."

*I'm not...*is what Marco wanted to say but stopped before the words escaped his lips. He'd only met the boy officially a few hours ago, so why had he acted the way he did? Was it because the human's youth? Or perhaps to assert dominance over Enel and his followers?

'Maybe because I now know he's connected to Ace somehow...'

Regardless, this was quite a mess they'd gotten themselves into.

'...and our new Lord has no idea...'

Their brief conversation came to an end when Law stepped out of the infirmary, wiping his hands on a towel.

"Well, yoi?"

"He's stable." The tattooed doctor informed them, dark circles prominent under his eyes, "When we return home, I'll need to keep him under constant supervision to make sure the residual limb heals properly."

Marco nodded, already thinking ahead. They still had to consider that the boy ran away, an act that generally required intense punishment. But, in this situation, perhaps solitary confinement would suffice. They could run it by Sabo...who knows how the pureblood would react when they returned home...

"Then, I will take my leave." Katakuri interjected, standing up, "Though before I go...do you have any plans to seal the boy?"

Marco closed his eyes, knowing this was coming at some point. Katakuri was old, old enough to remember the D clan's history and ability. The pureblood wouldn't report them, not if they took every precaution.

Whitebeard's original policy (created all those years ago when the Moby was first built) was clear, if slightly outdated: the citadel was open to everyone, even D's, but only if their abilities were sealed away so they wouldn't be a danger to anyone, including themselves.

"He's only sixteen." Law put in, "Developmentally speaking, his natural abilities won't start to manifest for another two years."

"I'm aware of his youth." Katakuri replied, crossing his arms, "However, if I am not mistaken, you are without someone powerful enough to create a full seal...with Whitebeard's hibernation and all."

The pureblood had a point. Marco's eyes glanced over to Law and his many tattoos. Most of them were for show, but the ones on his back were part of the seal Pops had implemented years before. Unfortunately, Marco was no pureblood, which was why his attempt to seal Ace's abilities had fallen short.

Well, that and the fiery human had already awoken his inner power. He remembered very clearly when the now fledgling bit into his pearly white pendant and *literally* burst into flames.

"Are you offering us your services, yoi?"

"Merely making sure you have a plan in place." Katakuri continued, glancing to the infirmary door, "Depending on what tribe he's from, that child could become a threat in the future. For his sake, and ours, it is better to remove the possibility of rebellion now, before it manifests into something deadly."

Marco nodded in agreement, though that might be easier said than done. After speaking with Doma about the boy's blood, it was obvious now that he was NOT a *pure* D, or one of an untainted blood line. The fact that his blood wasn't toxic was proof enough of that.

They would need to determine his tribe (or *tribes*) of origin back at the citadel.

"We shall consider it once the boy is healthier, yoi." Marco answered, "Thank you for your concern." Katakuri nodded and left them alone, prompting him to follow Law into the infirmary. The human, Luffy, slept soundly in a bed with his arm bandaged up tightly. His skin was pale, and his hair was damp with sweat, but at least he wasn't dying any more.

Though, based on his many other injuries and terrible black eye, he would be in pain for a while.

"Will you help me transfer him to the van?" Law asked, not taking his eyes off the boy.

"Yeah, let's go. I'm tired of this place, yoi."

---

Luffy groaned as he woke up, slowly becoming aware that he was in something...moving. The vibrations jostled his sore body. The first thing he noticed when he opened his eyes was that there were a bunch of people surrounding him, seated within reach.

"You're awake." Turning his head, he met Torao's gaze, noting it was tired but pleased.

"W-Where...what-" Luffy broke into a coughing fit that only brought more pain. Torao steadied him and pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"You're in one of our vans. We're about thirty minutes out from Moby."

He blinked and swallowed nervously, glancing around to the other vampires watching closely. Some of them he recognized, like the big one...Bleh...something, and Doma who sat with his monkey perched on his shoulder.

The vampire gave him a small smile and stroked the animal's head methodically.

Another thing he noticed was that there were straps across his body (that was thankfully clothed in a gown of some kind), securing him to a gurney.

Luffy's first instinct was to test the strength of his restraints, only to be stopped by a pale hand coming into his field of vision.

"Don't, yoi. Those are keeping you still...it'll hurt more if we remove them." The one who spoke was a blonde vampire who seemed vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place him. Upon closer inspection, there were all sorts of lines attached to him which he simply didn't have the energy to think about.

"Ne...Torao..." Luffy whispered, rolling his head back to the tattooed doctor who was pushing something into one of his lines, "What's gonna happen to me?"

"Like I told you earlier, we're going to take care of you."

"...but..." He managed, vision becoming blurry and thoughts clouding, "...I d-did a bad thing...the old guy said everybody would b-be hurt...I 'don wanna...hurt any...one..." Luffy didn't hear the answer to his question.

All he heard was garbled voices and hands smoothing his hair again as he fell back into a drug induced sleep.

---

Sabo paced back and forth across the front steps of the citadel; hands gripped tightly behind his back. He was stressed, *really* stressed. Law had checked in throughout their journey to recapture the missing humans and so far, it wasn't going well. Last he heard, most of them were dead and Luffy was missing, possibly kidnapped!

This is why he wanted the kid to stay with him, preferably within reach! There were too many vampires out there who'd want to snatch him up and keep him for themselves. Luffy was too adorable for his own good.

'Based on Law's last communication...' Sabo mused, 'They should be arriving any minute now.'



Just as he thought that, the gates opened and three vehicles drove in, one after the other. Sabo rushed down the steps and met Jozu as he leapt out of the driver's seat.

"Where's Luffy?" He exclaimed, earning a pained expression from the larger vampire. Jozu sighed and motioned with his head towards the back where the double doors were opened, and a gurney was carried out.

Sabo paled as he recognized the small body secured to the padded stretcher, an oxygen mask tight over his face.

"What the hell happened!?" He whispered, fist clenching tighter and tighter as he looked over Luffy's battered face. Law said nothing but reached over to remove the blanket covering the rest of the small human.

Sabo's body went cold.

A bloody stump was all that was left of the boy's right arm, severed above the elbow. It was bandaged tightly, likely Law's handiwork.

"Who...how-"

"Vampires from Upper Yard took him." Law explained while leading the group into the building, Sabo hot on his heels, "We confronted them, but we were too late...it seems, after several botched attempts to remove his tag, they resorted to cutting the whole thing off."

"They stole him knowing full well he was tagged!?"

"Yes. From what we understand, they intended to gift him to a visiting pureblood." Law continued, pushing the door to the infirmary open, "It's been handled. Thankfully, Marco and I were well acquainted with the intended recipient. Now, if you'll give us some space, I need to do a follow up surgery."

Sabo nodded and stepped back, allowing the door to swing closed.

Law remained in the infirmary for many hours after that, hopefully utilizing whatever equipment he had to heal Luffy. The poor thing would be in so much pain when he woke up...

As he waited, Marco came to sit beside him, flipping his hood back. It was odd to see the esteemed vampire dusty and with dried blood on his pants.

"I apologize, yoi." Lord Phoenix said, turning to look at him, "For all our promises, we were only able to recover one human...and he was maimed horribly."

"It's not your fault." Sabo replied, "I for one am just glad Luffy's back where he belongs...and alive." Marco hummed.

"About that, as the acting head of the citadel for another day, you need to decide on the human's punishment. Though...he has already been punished quite a lot throughout this ordeal, yoi."

Sabo nodded, knowing what the other vampire was getting at.

"Yes, I believe solitary confinement will suffice." Though he did want to speak with Law about measures they could take to stop something like this from happening again, with regards to their captured humans and Luffy specifically.

After what felt like forever, Sabo was finally allowed inside to see Luffy. He already looked better than when he'd been taken out of the van but was covered in bandages and lines. It was painful to see someone so small be injured so terribly.

Law informed him that he would transfer Luffy up to one of the tower cells some time that evening, which were reserved for difficult humans. Sabo nodded, mentally pulling up an image of the rooms, having stopped over for a look during his first exploration of the citadel.

From what he understood, they were all empty at the moment.

"We'll put him in a large one, to give him some space." Law said, attaching Luffy's clipboard to the end of the rolling bed, "Feel free to renovate it however you like, here's the number."

He wasted no time and immediately rushed to Izo's quarters for aid. Thankfully, the vampire was glad to help and brought along a couple of his assistants. Sabo wanted to have the room ready by the time Luffy was brought up.

It took a while to arrive at their destination as the cell was all the way up in the tower. The door was made of metal and had a small barred window at face level. Sabo huffed and swiftly unlocked it, preparing himself for what he might see inside.

"Well...this could use some work." Izo whispered, examining the dusty yet suitably large room. Sabo hummed in agreement, eyes scanning over the rickety cot (the only piece of furniture in the room) and the two barred windows on either side of the back wall. But, with some work, it would serve their purposes just fine.

"Let's get to work."

---

Law was exhausted.

It'd taken multiple follow-up procedures, but he'd finally managed to fully stabilize Luffy. He plopped down in a chair next to the still sleeping human, mentally cataloging the medications required and gauze changes he'd need to do over the next few weeks.

If all went as planned, the little human would be functioning somewhat normally in a few weeks.

"We're ready, Captain." Penguin said, followed by Shachi and Jean. It was time to move Luffy up to the tower.

Law knew the boy likely wouldn't like it, being sequestered away from everyone, but it was for the best. It would satisfy the need to punish him and keep him out of contact with anything that could infect his many wounds...or inspire him to try another escape attempt.

The cell itself also had two large windows, which would hopefully keep Luffy from having any panic attacks. Once he was mostly recovered, and had behaved, perhaps they could take him outside again...

It wasn't difficult to lift the stretcher Luffy was on (the kid weighed practically nothing after all) and carry him up into the tower. When they turned the corner to where the cell door was located, Sabo was waiting for them.

"How'd he do?" The pureblood asked.

"I'm optimistic for a full recovery." Law replied, leaning slightly in an attempt to look into the boy's new home, "You've been working for a while, Sabo-ya, what exactly did you do?"

The vampire smiled tiredly and moved aside so they could take Luffy inside. Immediately, Law's eyebrow rose.

It was hard to believe it was a cell with the burgundy drapes and soft carpet covering the stone floor. The cot had been replaced with a good sized bed, one nice enough to belong to any vampire in the citadel. There were about three blankets on the bed and a soft pillow indicating where Luffy's head would go.

The way they'd rearranged it, the bed was framed by the two windows so the human could see outside from anywhere.

On the right wall was a small couch with a quilt and some stuffed animals (obviously made by Izo...how had he made so many in such a short period of time?). Just past the couch was the door into the small bathroom attached to the cell which had been cleaned and updated slightly.

The left side of the room was mostly empty but held a dresser for clothing and extra blankets.

Law wouldn't have believed the cell was made to hold a prisoner if not for the barred door and some chains hanging from the ceiling. Hopefully, they wouldn't need those, but if they did, they'd keep Luffy from reaching the door.

"You spoil him, Sabo-ya."

"I know..." The pureblood said, smiling sheepishly, "What can I say, I've gotten attached to him!"

'You, Ace, and every other vampire in this citadel...' Law mused with a snort as they carefully transferred Luffy onto the bed. The boy was dressed once again in the off-white clothing all humans were required to wear. He would've looked the same as when he'd left if not for the bandages, black eye, and missing limb.

Well...and the distinct lack of his red pendant. After what had almost happened, Law wasn't planning on returning it to Luffy any time soon. Though, he couldn't blame him. The poor thing had been terrified and hadn't seen any other option.

'I'll consider returning it once he's proven himself.' If only because it seemed to mean so much to the little human.

Law adjusted the boy's IV's and bandages as Sabo pulled a blanket over him, looking somewhere between caring and murderous. The pureblood was obviously angry. He sighed, thinking of what would happen when Ace returned, and they came face to face with each other...Luffy would be caught in the middle between two extremely possessive vampires.

'Eustass-ya as well...this should be interesting if nothing else...'

---

Ace could barely keep himself seated as the van approached the citadel, early morning light shining on his face. He couldn't wait to see Lu again! How had he adjusted to living the stables? Would he be happy to see him? Would his adorable human give him one of his nervous smiles?

Ah, the suspense was killing him!

"You seem happy." Thatch teased, elbowing him in the gut.

"Just ready to sleep in my own bed again..." Ace replied, lying through his teeth with a happy smile on his face. Maybe he should stop by the kitchens and get Lu some more pancakes, he seemed to really like those.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much time to hang out with Luffy. Kidd had already made plans to contact the three citadels in their vicinity in hopes of having 'friendly relations', or at least, that's what he claimed.

Ace was pretty sure the pureblood intended to declare his intention to expand their citadel, which probably wouldn't go very well.

The familiar vibrations of the front gates opening drew him back to reality and made him breathe a sigh of relief. He was home.

It didn't take long for all the vampires to pile out of the vehicles and stretch while greeting their friends who'd stayed behind. However, it didn't take long for Ace's smile to drop. Something...wasn't right.

Scanning the courtyard, he immediately noticed that all of the stables had their outdoor portions closed off. That almost *never* happened unless...

"Kidd." Someone called, a vampire Ace recognized. It was Sabo, their new Second. He wore a dark green kimono and had a serious look on his face. The red-haired Lord turned to face the blonde and smiled immediately hugging him.

"Yo, how'd things go...hey...what's up?" Kidd asked, pulling back with a frown. Right away, Killer was at his side. Sabo bit his lip and whispered something in the other's ear, making his frown deepen. From behind the blonde pureblood came a familiar face that immediately made Ace break into a cold sweat.

Marco.

That's right...he needed to tell him about-

"*Ace*, yoi." Marco bellowed, making everyone turn to look at him and his stomach drop. His sire didn't look pleased. Had he...figured it out?

'Oh crap, is Lu okay?' Ace thought, swallowing nervously.

"Let's move this to the meeting hall." Kidd growled after delegating something to Killer (who rushed off to coordinate the other returning vampires), "It seems we all need to have a little chat."

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Notes

Thank ya'll so much for the hits, comments, and kudos on this story so far! There are some important revelations in this chapter and I hope ya'll enjoy it :)

"So...let me get this straight." Kidd said in a low tone from where he was seated at the head of the table, "A group of ten humans escaped and found a way to remove their tags but were ambushed by a hunting party from Upper Yard." Marco nodded, making Ace tense up.

He hadn't felt this nervous in a long time, and he wasn't the only one. Law, the pureblood Second, Doma, and even Thatch were all far from relaxed. Only Ace's sire appeared completely calm.

"Most of them were killed though you were able to recover one...but only after demolishing any and all friendly relations with the citadel."

"That's correct." Marco affirmed, "Thankfully, Law and I are on friendly terms with Charlotte Katakuri. He was a great help in convincing Enel to return our property."

"...and the boy? He's in solitary right now?"

"Yes, yoi. His wound has been treated and his life is no longer in danger."

Kidd hummed and clasped his hands together on the table in front of him, obviously in deep thought. The silence was nerve racking, especially for Ace who knew his turn was coming soon. There was no way Marco hadn't recognized Luffy from those initial scouting pictures...

While he was grateful Lu was going to be okay (though it took all of his self-control to not rush to his side...or hunt down those responsible), why had he run off in the first place? He'd received only the best treatment from both him and Law.

'I bet those other humans in his cell convinced him.' He thought with a scowl, 'Damn it! Maybe if I'd kept him close and out of sight, none of this would've happened!'

Maybe Luffy would still have his arm.

"I apologize." The Second whispered, speaking up and drawing the Lord's attention, "Had I been more attentive..." The pureblood grit his teeth and looked down, definitely frustrated, as anyone would be in his situation. He was in charge when it happened after all.

"Don't blame yourself, Sabo." Kidd stated firmly, straightening up, "These things happen, and frankly, I don't think it's a big deal."

"Really, yoi?" Marco put in with a raised eyebrow. Even Law who stood with his back to the wall looked up at the Lord's statement. Kidd shrugged.

"Considering I wasn't planning on being friendly with Upper Yard to begin with, and they were in the wrong, no harm no foul." He frowned and leaned forward, "*However*, I am interested to hear how such a large group of humans escaped. Losing nine, including two females, is going to put a sizable dent in our livestock count."

The room was silent for a moment as everyone thought carefully about how to respond. Unfortunately, Kidd was right. They'd *never* lost so many humans all at once before, at least, not to Ace's knowledge.

"It was my fault." Doma interjected, standing up to bow, "Their leader took a close friend of mine hostage...I felt that I had no choice but to do what they ordered." At his words, the monkey climbed off the vampire's shoulder to bow as well, whimpering softly.

"...and *this* is your friend?" Kidd questioned, motioning to the monkey.

"Yes, we have been together for many years now."

The Lord snorted in disbelief and ran a hand through his hair.

"Okay...just...keep a closer eye on him next time." Ace was actually surprised at the pureblood's response. He had been expecting Doma to be severely ridiculed or punished for what many would call a foolish action. The vampire thanked Kidd and sat back down, exhaling sharply in relief.

"The one we retrieved, was he worth the trouble?" Ace's gaze immediately moved back to the pureblood Lord, "It sounds like we lost a lot more than we gained, and yet you all seem pleased that one human child was re-captured."

"I don't know about everyone else," Doma began, "but I personally feel that I owe him. When the other humans in his group left me for dead, he stepped in and saved my life." Kidd raised an eyebrow.

"Is that so?"

"Simply put," Marco interjected, motioning for Doma to sit back, "The boy is special, in more ways than one, yoi. From what Law and I have deduced, his blood has rare healing properties that make him a valuable resource for the citadel."

Ace blinked. That was news to him...he knew Luffy's blood was different, but the ability to heal vampires? Really?

"So, you all believe he's valuable enough to make up for what we lost?"

"Yes." The Second, Sabo put in while ringing his hands together, "Though I didn't know about his blood till today, I've spent a great deal of time with him over the past few weeks and have come to enjoy his company."

Kidd smirked.

"Even you, Sabo?"

The other pureblood cleared his throat and blushed.

"Luffy is adorable, Eustass. I imagine when you meet him, you'll agree with me."

Ace took a second to process had just been said. Sabo had been "spending time" with *his* Lu? He thought he was *adorable*? WHAT THE FREAKING HELL!?

---

The conversation came to an abrupt halt when Ace's shoulders burst into flames.

While everyone immediately leapt up, Sabo didn't move, fixed in place by the freckled vampire's furious gaze. Ace was growling at him like a wild animal! Had he said something to offend him?

More importantly, WHY WAS HE ON FIRE!?

Lord Phoenix whispered a curse under his breath and motioned for everyone to step back.

"Sabo, yoi. *Don't. Move.*"

Inclined to follow the ancient vampire's instructions, he swallowed and held Ace's fiery gaze as calmly as he could. As a pureblood, he shouldn't be intimidated by a turned, but Sabo most certainly was.

Ace looked like a fiery demon ready to devour him whole.

"What the hell is going on, Phoenix?" Kidd hissed, hand coming up to one of his pistols. Marco frowned as he slowly approached Ace, Thatch coming closer on the other side of the fiery vampire.

"His mark needs to be renewed, yoi."

"What?"

"Long story short," Thatch put in with a shaky smile, "Acey's body rejects Marco's blood, always has. Sometimes, when he goes too long without it being re-done...stuff like this happens. Don't worry, it's a pretty easy fix...so long as no one makes any sudden movements."

Sabo continued to stay stock still, gaze never dropping from Ace's now scarlet one. He felt that if he averted his eyes, the beast would pounce.

Suddenly, Thatch rushed forward and forced the younger vampire's chest onto the table. Ace immediately snarled and thrashed, nearly throwing off the older one's hold. But when Law and Doma both joined in, his movements were finally restrained.



Marco wasted no time in ripping Ace's shirt off, cutting his hand, and allowing the blood to flow down his back. Curious (and now no longer in danger), Sabo got up and jogged over to see exactly what was being done.

On Ace's back was Whitebeard's mark that glowed red as it accepted the blood, drinking it greedily. Before returning to its original color, a circle of some kind appeared, spun around, and re-settled onto the tan skin. Almost immediately, the flames died down and Ace went limp, gasping for air. Everyone relaxed, confident the vampire wasn't a threat anymore.

"You okay there, fledgling?" Thatch asked, leaning against the table and patting Ace's head.

"Y-Yeah...what-" The freckled vampire sat as he coughed but went stock still when he registered Sabo a few feet away, "You...what did you do to Lu!?" It seems the vampire remembered why he was pissed at Sabo and lunged for him, only to be stopped by Marco.

Ace flailed around in the elder vampire's grip, to no avail.

"Calm down, yoi!"

"I can't *calm down*!" He screeched, clawing at the arms holding him, "Luffy's mine, not his! How dare you try to steal him from me!" Sabo frowned, processing the words. 'Luffy' could only be one person...and considering his previous observation of Ace's apparent connection to the boy, it would seem he was a bit...jealous.

"Luffy doesn't belong to you." Sabo said carefully, earning a strained snarl, "He's property of the citadel, and I have as much right as anyone to enjoy his presence."

"LIKE HELL YOU DO!" Ace snapped, "We have a special connection-"

"Special connection? You just don't want to share!"

Before Sabo truly lost his temper, Law intervened by stepping in between them.

"Enough, both of you! Arguing like *children* will get you nowhere." At that, Sabo backed off, taking a moment to straighten his kimono while Ace shook off Marco's now loosened grip. For a few minutes, the room was silent as the two young vampires continued to glare at each other.

Sabo couldn't help but feel...threatened. He'd come to think of Luffy as being something special in his life (*his* human as accepted by the citadel) and now Ace intended to challenge his claim! So what if he'd known Luffy before him!

"*Sit down.*" Kidd growled, face taut with frustration. From experience, Sabo knew they were pushing the limits of the pureblood's patience. "Ace, explain this 'special connection', unless you prefer I question the human instead?"

Ace went from angry and intimidating to fearful in a split second. He wasted no time sitting down, flanked by Marco and Thatch with Law and Doma ever watchful behind him. Kidd glanced to Sabo and motioned for him to sit as well.

This should be interesting.

---

Surprising himself, Ace spilled everything. He hadn't been prepared to tell anyone but Marco what had occurred all those weeks ago, but here he was explaining it to the new Lord and even Doma!

He started at the beginning, when he'd spotted Luffy through one of their scout bugs and immediately felt like he knew him. He detailed his confrontation with the human and how he had smuggled him into the citadel.

Ace even told them about his visions and how they intensified when Luffy was around.

When Law's intervention came up, the doctor stepped in and detailed why he had chosen to help him with Lu. It wasn't unknown that Trafalgar had a soft spot for kids, but in front of their new Lord and Second, he apparently felt the need to justify his actions.

Throughout his explanation, all the other vampires were silent. Kidd listened intently; facial expression unreadable. Ace had no idea what would happen. Had Marco still been in charge, he could've predicted his punishment, but now...

"Ace, yoi." His sire whispered, eyes full of disappointment (which hurt more than he thought), "Why did you hide this from me?" Ace swallowed hard.

"I...I-I was afraid...afraid you'd take Lu away from me. And then the sudden change in leadership happened and I kind of panicked." Marco huffed and put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"It's okay, we'll figure this out, yoi." At that, everyone turned to Kidd, anxious to hear his thoughts on the matter. The red-haired vampire pushed back from his chair so that he was standing over them.

"Interesting story, Ace." He said, eyes more curious than anything, "The human, do you still feel strongly about him? Like you're 'connected'?"

"Yes." He replied without hesitation. Luffy was his special human, there was no doubt about that. Frankly, he wasn't afraid to assert his claim and possessiveness over the boy (especially when a certain pureblood thought it was okay to prance around like he owned him).

"Then I see no problem allowing you to pursue answers, so long as it doesn't interfere with your citadel duties."

Ace's face immediately lit up and his body relaxed. So...neither he nor Lu were going to be punished?

"But, for the offense of mild insubordination, two weeks of cleaning out the depository tanks." Ace's pleased expression quickly morphed into one of disgust, but...it certainly could be worse. "...and no more secrets, yeah?" Thatch clapped him on the shoulder and grinned, making him feel a bit better and completely exhausted.

Marco's emergency renewal had *hurt like hell*.

"Let's adjourn for now." Kidd stated, observing him closely before turning to the blonde pureblood, "Sabo and I have some things to discuss."

As Ace was assisted out of the room, he couldn't help but wonder what the two vampires were going to talk about...hopefully not him or Lu.

---

Once they were alone, Kidd fell back in his chair with a huff. He'd known becoming a Lord would be difficult, but it was downright exhausting, especially when your subordinates apparently had no issues keeping secrets.

"Sabo...what do you make of Ace?" He asked, thinking back to their prior confrontation (it'd honestly been a bit of a shock to see his usually dignified and restrained friend lose it like that).

"He's strong, and quite possessive of Luffy." The blonde vampire observed while taking a seat next to him, "To be honest, I dislike him."

"Because you want the brat too?"

"Something like that..." Sabo sighed, slouching a bit, "I worry that if they truly are connected, I may be...left out."

Kidd snorted in amusement. He'd never expected Sabo of all vampires to give in to his more primal, controlling instincts and actually try to claim a human as his own, to the point where he was willing to fight his challenger.

Of course, per citadel policy, that was impossible. No one could officially own a human under Whitebeard's laws, though that wasn't necessarily the case in other parts of the world.

'I really need to meet this boy.'

Noticing Sabo was a bit antsy, Kidd jumped right to the point of why he wanted to speak to his Second in private.

"Putting the matter of the human aside, you've been doing some reading and research in Whitebeard's library, correct?"

"Yes...why?" Kidd leaned forward.

"See what you can find from Whitebeard himself: diaries, journals, whatever."

"Is there something specific you would like me to find?"

"Anything you can on his past with the D clan."

Sabo's eyes widened and his body tensed up.

"Are you serious!?"

"You know damn well I am." Kidd explained, eyes hard, "Vampires don't just burst into flames, and knowing what we know about Whitebeard, *it's possible.*"

Not long after they'd been assigned to the Moby Dick, Kidd's father, Shanks, had pulled them aside and encouraged them to do some research before getting too involved. Unnervingly enough, there was little to nothing about Whitebeard in the council's records. Even in their textbooks, the vampire hardly ever came up except as a "war-monger" and "disturber of the peace".

They knew that he had been one of the most powerful Lords of the age, until he'd suddenly (and without warning) gone into hibernation, passing his citadel down to Marco the Phoenix, his prized first commander. However, thanks to his father's own collection of books and history, Kidd had discovered an ancient rumor that the pureblood had a propensity for collecting D's.

Not much was known about the D clan other than that they had been around since before the Fall. They were some sort of special breed of human that was said to have been able to kill even a pureblood vampire. Their trademark was their poisonous blood, completely inedible and fatal to those who drank it.

As such, it was impossible to turn them (or so Kidd thought).

The D's became legends, myths to scare fledglings, after the Great Hunt. The council led their most powerful warriors across the newly decimated world, killing them all until none were left. The clan was stubborn though, and Kidd had heard talk that one was seen within the last two decades.

Some were even said to have taken refuge inside vampire citadels, giving up their freedom to keep their lives.

So, from day one, he'd been on the lookout for anything suspicious. Until today, there hadn't been anything aside from general unease and the feeling that their subordinates knew something they didn't (which, frankly, they probably did).

"You think Ace is a D, don't you?" Sabo whispered, face pale with tension. His Second knew very well what would happen should they discover D's in their citadel, it could be bad.

"It's possible, but I don't want to make any judgments without all the facts." Kidd replied, "The only thing I know right now is that he burst into flames, 'Bo, that's not normal."

"But...he's a vampire, a recently turned one. That's impossible, right?" The other pureblood argued, "Their blood is poisonous, supposedly of demonic origin." It was ironic that humans would be given the title of 'demon' over vampires, but that *had* to be what the D stood for, or at least, that's what Kidd thought.

"Just look into it and let me know what you find."

"All right." Sabo agreed, pushing his chair back to stand up, "I will see what I can do but... what will you do if Ace *is* a D, or if we find more?"

Kidd had put a lot of thought into that and considering he'd never actually met a D; he wasn't sure how he would react. All the pictures in textbooks depicted them as demons with horns and animalistic posture usually tearing the throat out of some poor, defenseless vampire. That being said, he had promised himself and his father that he wouldn't just bow down to whatever the council decreed. He would forge his own path and make his dream of a restored world come true, with or without their approval.

"Who knows." Kidd smirked, licking over his fangs, "Having a D under my command sounds rather exciting."

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A few days later, Ace trudged through the halls smelling like he'd been dunked in the sewers. All the vampires he passed teased him, but he was too tired to care. Cleaning out the blood depositories was a hard job, one he hoped he would never have to do again.

...two weeks of it though...he wasn't sure he could take it.

Ace checked in with Law regularly, hoping every day that Lu would wake up. So far, he was still asleep, his body needing the rest to heal.

More than anything, he wanted to see his poor, injured human. But because he was being held in solitary now, only Law and his team could visit him. The only thing that perked Ace up was the fact that Sabo (that *damned* pureblood) couldn't see Luffy either.

Lord Second was apparently spending most of his time since the convoy's return in the library doing who knows what. Honestly, Ace was fine with that because it meant he wouldn't be getting close to Lu with his face stuck in some dusty book.

As strange as it was, the citadel was moving back into a routine of normalcy. The warriors and scouts who'd returned quickly fell back into regular training and Kidd was becoming a staple, often training with his men or surveying the still locked up stables.

Since they'd lost a lot of humans, he spent most of his time working to fortify the pens and outer security to ensure such a large breakout didn't happen again.

Who knew the pureblood was so good with his hands?

Ace watched through a window as the red-haired vampire bolted another metal rod onto the outside of a pen to create a crisscross pattern with the bars, shirt off and sweat glistening. He'd only just started the project that morning and was already almost done!? Kidd was impressive.

"Ace-ya, there you are." He turned to face Trafalgar, who was now standing behind him. How long had he been there? "Good news, Luffy-ya is showing signs of waking."

"Really!?" Ace exclaimed, heart leaping in his chest. It'd been so long since he'd seen him, and he wanted nothing more than to cuddle with the small human and make sure he knew that he was there for him. "C-Can...can I see him?"

"Yes, on one condition." Trafalgar said, nose wrinkling in disgust as he got closer, "...well, perhaps two conditions. First, please shower, your stench is absolutely putrid. Second, Marco and I will be there, just in case."

Ace nodded, giddy with excitement. It was actually a great relief that he didn't have to worry about keeping secrets anymore, especially from his sire. Marco's approval meant a lot to him and it had *hurt* to lie. Just before he could turn the corner, he skidded to a stop, remembering one other thing he wanted to ask the doctor.

"Er, Law, h-have you found anything out yet? I know it's only been a few days but-"

"Patience, Ace-ya." Law huffed, walking towards his clinic, "Go clean yourself up and meet us in the tower." He'd given the doctor some samples and asked that he compare them with blood taken from Luffy. He had no idea what they might find, possibly nothing, but it was the first real step they could take in figuring out how they were connected.

Ace had never taken a shower so fast in his entire life, or at least the small sliver of life he could remember. Barely seven minutes later, he was dashing up the stairs wearing his trusty cargo pants and a black shirt, ready to see Lu. As expected, Marco and Law had beaten him there and were waiting outside the locked cell.

"Much better." Law observed with a short sniff, much to Ace's annoyance. Marco sighed and motioned for the doctor to get on with it, making the tattooed vampire chuckle as he unlocked the door with a key from his belt, stepping aside so they could enter.

"Make sure you thank Kidd and Sabo later, yoi." Marco whispered as they stepped past the threshold, "It was only by their blessing that you get to see him despite solitary precautions still being in place."

'...and by your intervention.' Ace mused, feeling nothing but gratitude for his sire. He knew the elder vampire had been tirelessly advocating for him over the past few days, managing to even convince *Sabo* to let Ace see Luffy. 'Ha, take that Blondie!'

While this was a small victory, it made his chest swell with confidence.

Ace wasted no time in rushing to the small boy's bed side, immediately falling to his knees next to the bed. Luffy was breathing slowly, his face pale. Worst of all was his arm. Though the stump was wrapped snugly in bandages, that didn't change the fact that it was gone.

He bit his lip and ran a hand gently over Luffy's hair. The poor thing...he must've been so scared out there all alone.

"Sabo certainly went all out with the decorations..." Marco observed as he came up behind Ace. The freckled vampire just shrugged, deciding to ignore the lavish room for now (though

he was sort of pleased Sabo had taken the time to make it less of a cell...it would make Lu's transition easier).

They watched Luffy in silence, waiting for the boy to finally wake. After what felt like ages, the limp hand in Ace's twitched a little.

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For a moment, it felt like Luffy was floating, outside of his own body. His mouth felt dry and his eyelids seemed to stick together. Where was he...how...what happened?

"-ffy...Lu..."

The boy groaned, barely registering the voice calling to him. Why did it sound so familiar? He tried to move his limbs, receiving only twitches for his effort. When he finally opened his eyes, he immediately closed them, the bright light blinding him.

"Hey there, Lu." He blinked to focus his gaze, scanning over to the person holding his left hand tightly. It took a few moments to recognize the vampire, his mind foggy and slow.

"...A-A-Ace...?" Luffy whispered before coughing violently. The freckled vampire immediately crowded over him in concern, touching his cheek gently.

"Hey, hey, easy. You've been asleep for almost three days now. Give your body a minute to wake back up." Luffy swallowed and weakly nodded, strangely grateful someone he knew was with him.

He gently rolled his head to the left and noted he was on a bed somewhere unfamiliar. It was pretty nice though...was it somebody's room? Beyond Ace was Torao and the blonde vampire he'd met in the van. They both said nothing, simply observing from afar.

As the minutes ticked by, Luffy's mind began to clear. His memories of what had happened to him came flowing back like a torrent, making him inhale sharply and force himself up into a seated position.

He was vaguely aware of Ace and the other vampires around him saying something, but all he could think of was his arm. Ignoring the way his stomach rolled with the sudden movement, Luffy shakily felt along his right arm, starting at the shoulder.

At first, there was his skin and bandages...but then, it simply dropped off.

Luffy's eyes watered and his bottom lip quivered as he grasped for what was no longer there.

"Luffy...stop that." Ace whispered gently, taking his hand and bringing it away from the stump, "Look at me, you're okay. I'm here." The vampire turned his head by cupping his jaw and wiped away the tears that he couldn't stop from flowing.

Gazing into the familiar silver of the vampire's eyes, all the emotion hit him at once and he fell into Ace's chest, sobbing. All of his pain, agony, *fear*...he couldn't hold it in anymore. The vampire shushed him like a small child, holding him firmly but delicately so as to not hurt him.

They stayed like that for a while until Ace finally released him and helped him sit back against the headboard. Luffy wiped at his eyes using his left hand, honestly a bit terrified to move the other one. He still had IV's in his arm, but he didn't have the energy to try and mess with them (especially when Torao was standing right there).

"Do you hurt anywhere, Luffy-ya?" The vampire asked, stepping forward. Luffy nodded.

"M-My head...and my...um..."

"Your arm?"

"Mn." He affirmed, unable to make the words form in his terribly dry mouth. As Torao checked him over and adjusted the lines, Ace watched him closely, eyes alternating between sympathetic and harsh, the latter making him shudder.

"Luffy, why did you run away?" He flinched as the question.

"I-I..." Ace's silver eyes were unwavering, making him tremble even more than he already was, "My friends and I w-wanted to be free...but..."

"It didn't go as planned, yoi." The blonde vampire interrupted, earning a curt nod from Luffy. Nothing had gone according to plan, but at least his friends had gotten away. That in and of itself was enough to make everything worthwhile.

Ace brought him back to reality by grabbing his face, this time a bit rougher than he had before.

"Don't do that again, Lu."

He sniffled and whined at the intense contact, but he was too weak to fight back.

"Do you understand?"

"Y-Yes...I won't run again." Luffy managed, voice breaking slightly. Satisfied with his response, Ace released him and flashed a soft smile.

"Good. Don't worry, Lu, we'll take good care of you. You're safe now."

Luffy simply bit his lip, honestly overwhelmed. His body ached terribly, and his emotions were still all over the place. Torao and the blonde vampire, who introduced himself as Marco (Ace's sire apparently), completed a comprehensive exam of his body and lines, giving him some medication for the pain and re-bandaging his head.

They also explained his current circumstances and how he would be in solitary confinement as part of his punishment for the time being.

"What about everybody else?" He croaked, glancing out one of the barred windows to the stables below.



"We have restricted their access to the outdoor sections of their cells until further notice." Marco informed him, "However, I'm sure you'll be pleased to know that we have decided not to ration their meals or water thanks to your cooperation, yoi."

He blinked at that. Cooperation?

"You were intending on surrendering had Enel's lackeys not shown up, correct?" Torao put in, making Luffy think back to his time huddled in the underground bunker.

"Erm...yeah, I was..."

"That's why we've been lenient. Well, that and the fact that you saved Doma's life." Luffy let out a sigh of relief. At least the other humans in the citadel wouldn't suffer too much because of their actions.

"Anyway..." Torao continued, pulling out a clipboard, "Now that you're awake, I have something to explain, something I'm sure you will be interested to hear, Ace-ya." The freckled vampire looked up with anxious eyes.

"D-Did you-"

"I did." He stated, glancing between the two of them, "Though I'm honestly a bit annoyed that I didn't think of it in the first place..."

"Just say it!" Ace exclaimed, firmly laying a hand on Luffy's leg, the pressure constant even through the layers of blankets. What were they talking about?

"After comparing your DNA...I have confirmed that you are indeed 'connected', as you keep saying." Torao said, making Luffy's stomach drop. The vampire looked him in the eye before continuing. "You two are siblings."

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! There's some important 'D' history in this chapter ;) I hope that all of you are taking care of yourselves and your loved ones in this crazy time. ENJOY!

Luffy gaped at Torao, certain he'd heard wrong. Siblings? That was impossible! Though his time with his parents had been cut short, he was positive he didn't have any brothers or sisters wandering around the wastes.

"R-Really!?" Ace exclaimed, face glowing with excitement. Torao nodded while the blonde vampire, Marco, frowned.

"I don't see how that's possible, yoi. Ace was turned sixteen years ago, and this boy can't be older than that."

"Yes...a fact that made my investigation more difficult." Torao admitted, moving his gaze back to Luffy, "However, there is an explanation. Though their DNA indicates they are related, they are not full siblings. I hypothesize they are *half*-brothers...in other words, they share one parent."

Luffy swallowed and looked at Ace. The vampire appeared ecstatic, grinning happily. Was it possible that either his mom or dad had had a kid before marrying each other? If so, they'd never mentioned it to him. The only thing that came to mind was the mystery person his mom would sometimes bring up, saying they were family and that they'd someday come back to them.

Could that person have been Ace, before he was turned?

Something else this revelation brought to light was the fact that the freckled vampire, his half-brother apparently, was also a 'D'. Luffy's eyes flicked over to Marco, Ace's sire. If he'd turned him, then surely, he knew about his heritage, having tasted his blood. Though his own blood was different than most D's, it still tasted awful.

Ace's was probably similar if not fully poisonous. How had the vampire succeeded in changing him?

"Can you believe it, Lu!" Ace cheered, grabbing his left hand and shaking it, "We're brothers! I have a little brother!" Luffy bit his lip to keep from crying out as the vampire shook his weak body back and forth. All of the movement was making him feel a bit nauseas.

"Careful, Ace-ya." Torao chided, removing his hand from Luffy's, "Don't forget he's injured."

"R-Right...sorry." He said with a sheepish grin, showing off his pointed incisors. Luffy looked down at his one remaining hand, trying to process all the new information. He'd lived sixteen years of his life without knowing he had an older brother, one who was turned fairly young, in his twenties from the looks of him...sixteen years ago.

Had he even been born when Ace became a vampire?

It was all so confusing...and made his head hurt from thinking too much.

"Luffy-ya." Torao said, bringing him out of his thoughts, "Please tell us the names of your parents." He stilled, suddenly nervous under the stares of three vampires. Though Torao definitely knew he was a 'D', what about the others? Ace had never brought it up and seemed confused about a lot of things in his past.

"First names only." Marco added, voice firm and nonnegotiable. Flinching under his intense stare, Luffy nodded.

"D-Dragon...and Rogue."

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Though the name 'Dragon' wasn't familiar at all, 'Rogue' sparked something in Ace. It made his heart swell with longing. Suddenly, his head began to pound, and he gripped it with a cry of pain. Was he going to have another vision!?

When he opened his eyes, he was somewhere else. The sand all around him gave it away as the wastes, though the terrain didn't appear anywhere around the citadel. As a scout, he could recognize landmarks anywhere within a certain radius of the Moby Dick, his home.

A short distance away was a dwelling built using the remains of a fallen building. It wasn't much, but he knew it. Had this been his home before Marco had found him?

Before he could take a step forward, the door opened, and a human woman exited carrying a basket of some kind. She was very beautiful with pink-colored hair and freckles on her cheeks. Ace recognized her from some of his other visions, though he'd never seen her so clearly before.

"Ace, dear, come help me with the laundry!" She called, making him flinch. Surely, she couldn't mean-

A small boy came rushing out behind her, a rusty old pipe in his hands. Ace was shocked to see himself as a child, lean and tanned...though quite *short*. He was glad he grew out of that. Young-Ace cleared his throat and turned around to face the woman.

"I can't, Mom, I have training today with Dad. He says I'm gonna be strong, but I gotta practice!" The woman, who he'd now identified as his mother, frowned down at young-Ace and bopped him on the head, sending him down onto his rear.

"Nonsense! What kind of warrior leaves without finishing their chores?" She took away his pipe and replaced it with a pile of clothing, "You can spar later."

Ace snickered as his young-self gave in with a huff, wisely doing as their mother ordered. Recalling the name Luffy said, he whispered it to himself, testing how it felt on his tongue.

*"Rogue."* His mother's name. Though, now that he made the connection, he recalled what the boy said about his parents. They were both dead, killed by vampires. Ace frowned slightly as he watched his mother smile and laugh together with her son, someday to be taken away by his kind.

It made him feel guilty, like it was somehow his fault.

He watched them interact for a while, wishing he could remember this actually happening, until someone else entered the scene. Unlike his mother, the male's face was blurry and his body unrecognizable. Was this his father?

When the man appeared, young-Ace rushed up and mimed punches to him, receiving a hair ruffle in return. Before the scene could go any further, everything faded away and he shot up off the floor of Luffy's new room with a gasp. Marco steadied him while Law grabbed his chin and looked into his eyes.

"W-What...how long was I out?"

"About ten minutes." Law informed him, releasing his face, "We were starting to worry." Ace worked to catch his breath while looking past the doctor to Luffy who was still sitting up in bed. The kid looked concerned, but also sickly with his own breathes coming out as soft wheezes.

Now that he knew what their connection truly was, he could see the resemblance between them: dark hair, tan skin. Though neither of them looked all that much like Rogue...their mother.

'I guess I got the freckles.' Ace thought in amusement, imaging how strange Lu would look with them all over his face. It just didn't fit him.

"What did you see, yoi?" Marco asked, voice low and serious. He stood up, dusted himself off, and approached Luffy's bed with a soft smile.

"I saw Mom...she was kind, wasn't she Lu?" The boy's bottom lip trembled with emotion so strong he couldn't speak. Luffy managed to nod, barely holding the tears back. The poor thing obviously missed his parents dearly.

"Y-You don't remember her?"

"Not really...just bits and pieces." Ace admitted, reaching up to put a hand on the boy's head, "But from what I just saw, I know she was a good person. I'm so sorry for your loss." As much as he wanted to grieve with him, he found he simply couldn't bring forth enough emotion, not when he couldn't remember the connection clearly.

It was frustrating, being unable to feel sorrow upon learning your mother was dead and had been gone for a long time.

"Ace, I think it's time we let your brother get some rest, yoi." Marco put in, placing a hand on his shoulder and gently separating them. Luffy sniffled and wiped his eyes with his good arm, looking up at him with caution. It would take time for them to properly bond, Ace knew that. After everything he'd done to him: kidnapping him, holding him against his will, ultimately treating him like a prized pet.

He knew in his heart that he couldn't do that anymore, not with his baby brother. Luffy was only human, but he was *family*. Possibly the only blood relative he had left.

"Yeah..." Ace affirmed, flashing one last grin before making his way to the door. To his surprise, Marco and Law stayed put by Luffy's bed, not going with him.

"We'll leave in a few minutes." Marco said, waving him out, "We need to have a talk with Luffy...in private, yoi." Recognizing his sire was leaving no room for negotiation, Ace bowed respectfully and closed the door behind him.

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Luffy shifted nervously as the blonde vampire settled himself on his bed, arms crossed. Though he didn't think Marco was a pureblood like Sabo, he exerted the same pressure. It made him want to lower his gaze or hide under the blankets.

"I am going to ask you a series of questions, boy." Marco said calmly but with scarlet eyes, demanding immediate obedience. Luffy suddenly found himself unable to look away, nervous sweat forming along his spine. "I expect the truth, and nothing less, yoi. What you tell me, and Law, here today will determine how you are treated in the future. Understand?"

"Y-Yes, Sir." He found himself whimpering, folding under the elder vampire's gaze.

"What is your full name?"

"Monkey D. L-Luffy."

"And your parents, yoi?"

"Monkey D. Dragon and Portgas D. Rogue." Luffy replied quietly, hand fisting into the blanket across his lap. It felt so wrong to reveal those secret names to vampires after being warned over and over by his father not to.

Tora made some notes on his clipboard while Marco closed his eyes in thought.

"Then, in keeping with tradition, you took your father's name and inherited his abilities, yoi."

"I-I guess..." Luffy stuttered, unsure what he was getting at. Honestly, he had no idea what his abilities were because they hadn't developed yet, and his father had never used his power in front of him. All he had was his foul tasting blood that was a panacea to vampires, an ability that had made his father very concerned. He hadn't wanted to pass it down to Luffy as it would turn him into a target, or so he said. Sometimes Luffy thought the man hadn't wanted a child at all.

They'd lived in hiding and kept him hidden away from everything for as long as possible.

Until *that vampire* found them.

Torao placed the clipboard down so he could pull a rolled-up piece of parchment out of his bag. Luffy hoped they didn't want him to read something. When the vampire unrolled it for him to see, his breath hitched.

It was an ancestral tree; one his family had kept up on the wall of their dingy home. One that detailed the tribal bloodlines of the 'D' clan. Considering Torao was also a 'D', it made sense they'd have one, but it was still weird to see it in the hands of vampires. His father, Dragon, had always kept theirs in pristine condition, saying it was a relic of the old times.

Almost immediately, Luffy's eyes went to the Monkey family line, far to the right of the "purer" bloodlines which formed the trunk of the great tree.

"I remember the Monkeys." Marco informed him, "Before the Fall, they were one of the tribes who worked to maintain the fragile peace between humans and vampires, in the shadows of course. If memory serves, after some cross-tribe breeding began to mess with your family's blood, it became...as the other bloodlines put it, *tainted*."

Luffy knew the story well, re-told by his father often. In their clan, only certain tribes could have children with another or risk dulling their poisonous blood. Naturally, marrying a normal human was absolutely forbidden. As the only defense between humanity and the vampires, they couldn't risk weakness. But something happened along his ancestral line where Monkeys scorned the law and began to have children outside of the approved lines.

The result was the loss of their poisonous blood, transformed by the mixing of genes.

Though their family was scorned and ridiculed by the rest of the 'D' clan, the vampires welcomed the change initially in hopes that it would help foster relationships between the two races. Unfortunately, with every generation that passed, it became difficult to predict what the blood of Monkey tribe children would look like.

According to his father, the vampires began to capture Monkey soldiers in the field and shut them away, using their mutated blood to heal their own men as the violence escalated.

Due to the uncertainty of it all, their family was isolated, called "cursed" despite their unaffected strength as warriors, and eventually hunted down along with the others when the vampires came into power.

"How interesting to have the blood of a Portgas in you as well..." Torao put in, tapping his finger on the Monkey's line before dragging it inward to land on the Portgas line. Luffy knew it was strange and in their clan, normally forbidden. His mother was a part of one of the few tribes approved to mate with D's of the Gol tribe, the most powerful and pure line in the entire clan.

As such, they had the foulest blood, made to match and enhance that of the Gol's.

"Their union created your unique blood." Torao continued, taking a moment to adjust the IV bag next to the bed, "Poison from you mother that was dulled by the exquisite blood of your

father."

Luffy said nothing, knowing he didn't need to affirm their suspicions. Saving Doma had already revealed the secret of his blood. He had no doubt in his mind that they would soon start taking it away in bags to heal and invigorate their soldiers.

"You are quite the rare find, yoi." Marco said slowly, eyeing him with renewed interest as the other vampire stored the paper back into his bag, "A 'D' at the end of the purity spectrum, and yet much more valuable than the others. It's a shame your father's gone."

He grimaced at the comment, knowing the vampire was bemoaning the loss of someone with blood that had probably tasted divine to their kind and could heal any wound.

"How do you know so much about us?"

"I lived during their time, yoi." Marco explained, standing up to walk to the window, "Though I don't look it, I was born before the Fall and witnessed the quiet fight between your clan and the vampires. I distinctly remember the day humanity found out about both of our existences and panicked."

He turned back around and motioned with his head to Torao.

"Law was a part of the D's forces at the time and fought hard against us, even after the land was devastated." Luffy blinked in surprise. That meant both of the vampires in front of him were *ancient*, several centuries old. "That is, until we captured him, and Pops took him in, yoi."

"You were all quite persistent." Torao put in with a nostalgic smirk, "I resisted Master Whitebeard with everything in my being, but had he not turned and sealed me, I imagine I wouldn't be standing here today."

Luffy watched with big eyes as the two vampires reminisced together. Torao seemed grateful that he'd been taken and probably forced to become a vampire. And to be sealed...he'd heard of it. Powerful vampires could seal away a D's abilities and turn them into essentially a normal human as a way to keep them in their citadels.

"B-But weren't you sad?" Luffy asked, leaning forward, "To be taken away from your family...and friends." The doctor's eyes softened, and he approached him to put a hand on his head, like Ace had done earlier.

"Tell me, Luffy-ya, has your stay here with us been as dreadful as you imagined?" He bit his lip in thought, thinking about the past weeks, now over a month since he'd been kidnapped. Though he didn't like being seen as inferior and penned in, he found that he didn't *dislike* life in the citadel. The air was cool and there wasn't a risk of developing an infection or dying of heat stroke.

And, when he'd been taken away by the other vampires, the Whitebeards had come for him. In that moment when his arm was seared off, he'd lost hope, but they rescued him. Torao looked at him with understanding eyes, like he knew where his thoughts had gone.

"I found that life here was much better than the life I left behind. Let us take care of you and show you that we're not all monsters." Luffy sniffed and fixed them with a hard stare.

"I don't want to be a pet...or a *slave*."

"In this world, I'm afraid you don't have much of a choice, yoi." Marco said, returning to his position next to Torao, "After humans nearly made themselves go extinct, we had no choice but to gather the survivors and keep them from dying out completely. Unfortunately, under the laws of the Council, we cannot-"

"I WANT TO BE FREE!" Luffy exclaimed, voice breaking, "I-I'm grateful you saved me, but I don't w-wanna be trapped-"

He suddenly coughed violently, instinctively bringing up his stump before remembering he didn't have a hand there anymore. The thought brought yet another bout of nausea. In seconds, Torao was there with a pan for him to dry heave into, nothing in his stomach to throw back up. The vampire rubbed his back until he was done and gave him a towel to clean himself off with.

"I think that's enough for today, yoi." Marco told him as the doctor disposed of the pan, "You are free to fight us as much as you wish but know it will simply make things more difficult. Be grateful we are willing to allocate citadel resources to your recovery."

Luffy could tell the vampire was getting frustrated with him, so he numbly inclined his head, not wanting to incur more displeasure. He just felt so *confused*. He'd lost his arm and found out a vampire was his brother all within such a short time. Maybe some sleep would help clear his head.

Before the two left him on his own, Torao pulled something out of his pocket and approached him with it.

"Since your tag has been...removed, we need to replace it with something else." Luffy immediately recoiled at the thought, eyeing the thing in the vampire's hand with suspicion and disgust. "I know how you must feel, but we cannot allow you to go without our mark. It's either this or I put another tag in your left arm."

Seeing he didn't have much choice, Luffy reluctantly relaxed and allowed Torao to pull the blankets back and expose his feet. The vampire swiftly attached thin bands with the mark of the citadel around both his ankles, locking them into place with a key off his chain. With a push of a button, they molded themselves to Luffy's skin.

There was a light, metal chain holding the two bands together, successfully shackling his feet to one another.

"These are what we use when injecting a tag isn't feasible for whatever reason." Torao explained while holding up some sort of remote for Luffy to see, "They serve every purpose your old tag did with a few extra features..." The boy gasped when something was pressed on the vampire's remote that caused the two bands to snap together, the chain drawing them in and keeping his ankles locked in place no matter how hard he pulled at them.



Luffy swallowed hard as his feet were released, immediately thinking how these new manacles would make escaping more difficult (when Zoro and the others finally came for him). Though the length of the chain allowed him to walk without much difficulty, running would be much harder.

"After your last little escapade, we have upped security throughout the citadel, yoi. You won't escape again." Marco said, gaining his attention. The vampire made to leave but turned around as if he forgot something. "One last thing...you will tell Ace nothing of what we spoke about today. He isn't aware of his heritage and I intend to keep it that way for as long as I can."

"I-I won't tell." He whispered, shakily pulling the blankets back up to cover himself. The ankle shackles weren't necessarily uncomfortable, but they let him know that he was once again *owned*. Marco nodded, approving of his answer, and the two finally left, locking the door to his room (or cell, as that was what it truly was) behind them.

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"Don't you think you were a little hard on him?"

"It was necessary, yoi." Marco replied as they locked the door, making sure it was secure. The two guards he'd summoned saluted and stood at attention with electric prods in their arms, just in case (nothing lethal, but enough to keep the youth, or any other humans who tried to reach him, under control). He intended to have two guards he trusted watching the boy at all times until things calmed down completely. "He needs to understand that this is his life now."

The little human had known more about his clan than he'd expected and seemed to be aware of his value. Marco had suspected Luffy had some Monkey genes in him because they were the only ones with that type of blood, but to think he and Ace were half-brothers...it complicated things.

"Are you concerned about Eustass-ya?" Law asked, keeping pace with him easily. Marco frowned.

"After Ace's little show, you mean? If I was in his position, I would certainly look into it. This is a very uncertain time and we must all be vigilant. Should they uncover Ace and Luffy's heritage...they might also find you, yoi."

Marco wasn't under the illusion that Ace would keep quiet about the human boy being his little brother. He imagined half the citadel knew by now. If they already suspected his fledgling was a 'D', then Luffy would be next. He'd worked so hard to keep Ace and Law hidden away from the prying eyes of the Council, but with the pureblood's arrival and Luffy's *entire situation*, he was starting to become genuinely concerned.

He'd rather not fight a war over them if he could help it. The only consolation he currently had was the fact that he didn't consider Luffy a threat. The little 'D' wouldn't develop abilities for another few years and was of a less dangerous bloodline than he'd originally expected.

Yes, Marco was significantly more worried about Ace than he was about the child that was secure in the prison tower.

"Quietly spread the word for everyone to be watchful, yoi." Marco whispered, not stopping, "I don't know what the purebloods will do, but we must protect Ace, from them and himself. He's *family*."

"...and if his memories continue to return?"

"Then I'll handle him, yoi." Marco hissed, turning right as Law turned left. Frankly, it would be easier to simply get rid of Luffy to stop the memories from coming back, but he couldn't do that...not when he meant so much to his fledgling. Besides, the young boy was incredibly valuable, it would be imbecilic to throw away such a prize.

They would need to be alert and wary for the next few months. He couldn't predict what was going to happen.

*Monkey D. Luffy.*

*Trafalgar D. Water Law.*

*Gol D. Ace.*

Their citadel was currently full of contraband and one in particular could prove to be their undoing if not handled properly. Ace was strong, and much more powerful than he knew. If he was to re-awaken, he had the ability to kill every single person within their walls.

---

Ace practically skipped through the citadel, telling anyone and everyone who would listen about his newly found, adorable baby brother. To most, this fact can as a surprise, but they cheered with him anyway. Though Lu was human, he was his brother and would be protected within their walls.

After grabbing a snack from the Blood Depository, Ace found himself examining the citadel walls and noting the doubled guard. It was to be expected after so many humans escaped at once. He imagined there would not be another successful break-out, let alone a human incursion though it was smart to prepare for one. Luffy's former pen-mates could try to free him. Not that Ace was terribly worried about them actually succeeding. It was far more likely they'd get caught in the process.

As he wandered, the freckled vampire considered ways to become closer with his brother. All of his tactics from before only seemed to scare Luffy and were based on exerting dominance over the human. Surely there was another way...one that would build trust between them.

'Maybe I should ask someone for advice?' Ace thought, turning towards the main building. Who of his family would be best...?

Against his better judgment, he found himself standing in front of Thatch's door. The goofy commander was one of his closest friends and sworn older brother. Surely, he would have

some sort of advice on how to bond with Luffy...right? Sighing, Ace knocked loudly, knowing the other vampire slept like a corpse and could be incredibly difficult to wake if he was napping.

Surprisingly, Thatch was awake and opened the door within seconds.

"Acey! This is a surprise." He exclaimed, leaning on the door frame with a cheerful smirk, "What brings you to my door?"

"Well, actually...I-I...I need some advice." Thatch's smirk fell and he observed Ace with a thoughtful expression.

"Oh yeah? Come right in then, make yourself at home." The older vampire's room was messy as always with the walls covered in either pictures of women or food. Thatch led him over to his couch and threw off some cooking utensils to make room for him while he sat across from him on a simple, wooden chair. "So, what can I do for ya?"

Ace quickly explained his predicament. From the first day he'd met Lu, he'd tried to bond with him and had failed quite spectacularly. No matter what he did, Luffy didn't lose his fear of him. He figured it was mostly his fault and wanted to rectify it all but wasn't sure how. Thatch listened quietly to his explanation, leaning forward on his hands when Ace finished.

"I can tell ya right now what your problem is."

"Y-You can?" He replied, honestly surprised. Thatch nodded.

"You're treating him like a human when you should be treating him as your brother." Ace frowned, allowing the statement to sink in. He thought he had been treating him like that... sort of. Thatch sighed. "Listen, I'm gonna tell it to you straight: the way you've been interacting with him, is...in a word or two...creepy as hell."

"W-What!? I am NOT creepy!" Ace exclaimed, offended by the notion. The other vampire raised an eyebrow.

"So, keeping him chained up in your closet was just normal brotherly bonding." He had nothing to say to that. "Look, believe it or not, this is normal. When Haruta first joined us, he was human. After he was turned, it took forever to adjust to him being one of us and not food. You've gotta start seeing him like you see me, Vista, Izo, and the others."

While Ace ruminated on what Thatch said, the other vampire stood and walked over to his desk where a rolled up poster hung. Brought out of his thoughts by the sound of him pulling down the poster and maneuvering it so it wouldn't roll back up, Ace stared blankly with his mouth slightly open, reading the words on the poster.

*'How to not be a creepy stalker 101: by Professor Thatch (the expert)'*

The word 'stalker' had been crossed out recently and replaced with 'older brother' in what was definitely Thatch's handwriting. The bastard had obviously been preparing to have this very talk with him.

"Lucky for you, I've had time to prepare." He picked up a book with the same title and his face plastered on the cover, "I also have literature in case you're interested. This ones a signed copy."

## Chapter 17

The week after Luffy's return to the citadel were rather uneventful. He slowly regained his strength and was able to move around the room, first with supervision, but now independently. The room was nice and comfortable, but also very lonely.

True to his solitary punishment, the only visitors he received after the talk with Ace's sire was either Torao or one of his 'keepers'. Currently, it was almost lunch time.

'I wonder what they'll bring me today...' Luffy thought, rubbing his stomach with his left hand when it started to rumble. He'd been unwilling and frankly unable to eat the first few days, nausea and malaise keeping him bedridden. It was nice to finally get back on his feet.

Walking over to one of the windows, he looked out over the yard. Most of the time, there wasn't much to see as the stables were still closed, but today, it looked like they might finally be open again! Luffy cracked a smile at the thought. It was about time the other humans got to feel the sun again.

As he watched, a vampire waved his hand and the outer doors to the pens opened, prompting many humans to stumble outside, appearing very happy. Luffy's smile fell, thinking how it was technically his and his friends' fault the others had been punished. He hadn't wanted it to end up this way.

A voice echoing in the hallway drew his attention away from the window. It sounded like his lunch was here!

"Sir? This is a surprise."

Luffy blinked, not moving from where he stood. Wasn't that-

"I have permission, stand aside please."

The two guards that were always outside his door stepped aside and allowed the vampire through, revealing a familiar face he hadn't seen in what felt like a lifetime.

"Sabo..." He whispered, taking in the pureblood's tired smile and new maroon robe. The last time he'd spoken to the vampire was before the escape.

"Good morning, or afternoon, I suppose." Sabo said, holding a tray of steaming soup and some bread. Luffy's eyes immediately locked onto the delicious looking meal. "Feeling hungry?"

"Mn!" He affirmed, making his way over to the couch as quickly as he could. The shackles around his ankles impeded his progress a bit and rattled as he walked. Luffy sat down and scooted over to allow Sabo a place to sit as he gently placed the tray on the table in front of them. He supposed he should feel more wary around the pureblood, but it had been so long

since anyone other than the medical team had been there, and he was craving contact with *someone*.

It was difficult to be alone.

"Dig in." Sabo stated, making Luffy lean forward expectantly. He picked up the spoon with his left hand and subconsciously moved to pick up the bowl with his right, only to stop short. It was hard to remember that the arm was simply gone. The vampire quickly pulled the table closer so he wouldn't need to grasp the bowl, much to his delight. "How are you doing?"

Luffy blew on the soup cupped by the spoon and put it into his mouth, savoring the taste before answering.

"...better...kinda lonely." He admitted, eagerly taking a bite of the bread (after putting his spoon down to free up his hand). Sabo sighed.

"That is the point of solitary confinement...I suppose that means it's working." The pureblood watched him eat for a few minutes before continuing, "Is it true that Ace is your brother?"

Luffy nodded curtly, mouth full of soup. It was pretty weird to readily admit, but it was true, nonetheless.

"I see..." Sabo muttered, bringing a clawed hand up to his chin in thought. Luffy examined him closely, continuing to eat his lunch. The vampire didn't seem upset or anything about the revelation, just...thoughtful.

"Apparently we have the same mom." Luffy continued, frowning at the thought. He missed his parents. "I guess Mom had a kid before she met my dad...I'm not sure why she never said anything about him."

"You're only half-brothers?" Sabo questioned, "With the way Ace has been talking, I never would've guessed...perhaps I should have spoken with Law." Luffy shrugged, really just wanting to focus on his food.

The vampire didn't speak while he finished his meal, allowing Luffy time to finish it and even lick the bowl. The food he was given was 'light' but hopefully it would be upgraded to something more substantial soon...he was ready for some meat. The boy put his bowl down and glanced to Sabo.

"Sabo?" He asked, making the vampire flash a smile.

"Sorry, just have a lot on my mind. I'm glad you're feeling better!" The vampire stood up and moved to take the tray but stopped. He then gently pulled Luffy to his feet and hugged him, breathing out slowly. "I know this has been hard on you...but please endure it. We just want to keep you safe."

Luffy hummed and lightly pushed away from the cold vampire.

"I know." Not that it made him feel any better about his current situation. His relationship with the vampires was strange, but also natural considering he was human. They saw him as a resource, one they wanted to possess and own. He supposed it was nice to be treated so well...but the yearning to escape and have no more bars around him never disappeared. Luffy wasn't just some prized pet to be kept and hoarded.

Sabo looked down on him with an expression of pity before moving to pick up the tray.

"You'll be pleased to hear that Law is considering moving you back into the stables." Luffy's eyes widened in surprise. Really? He'd thought his imprisonment in the tower would be permanent after their successful escape. "He has also decided to re-implement your 'walk', given proper precautions. It won't be as often as it was for a while, and it may not always be with me, but staying cooped up in here isn't exactly healthy."

Luffy cracked a smile, thinking how nice it would be to feel the grass under his feet again. He'd even started to *miss* the Sun! But...who else would be taking him out if not Sabo? Ace maybe, or Torao?

"Thanks!" Luffy chirped, wanting to show the vampire his gratitude. Sabo smiled in return before moving towards the door.

"You should thank Law the next time you see him. Keep behaving like you are, and I imagine your privileges will slowly be given back to you. But, in the meantime, you should rest. See you later, Luffy."

The boy waved lowly, watching the vampire leave his 'room' and flinching when the lock clicked back into place. The guards outside bade goodbye to Sabo and his footsteps quickly faded away. He huffed and shuffled back over to the bed, suddenly exhausted.

...this was his life now, but hopefully not forever. He wanted to be free.

'Don't take too long, Zoro.' Luffy thought before snuffling into the blankets and falling asleep.

---

Sabo was concerned.

Naturally, the sudden announcement that Ace and Luffy were siblings had been a shock, especially considering Kidd's suspicion that the former was a 'D'. During the week, he'd spent most of his time in the library, trying to find *something* on the ancient clan (and also attempting to avoid Ace...he just knew the vampire would rub it in).

Unfortunately, though Whitebeard was meticulous in his record keeping, there was not one mention of the 'D's'. Which was honestly quite disheartening.

'...and Luffy is Ace's half-brother...' Sabo mused, turning a corner. He supposed that was good news, but it still meant that the boy probably had some 'demonic' blood in his veins. They just didn't know enough about the clan to even know where to start! '...and involving Marco is out of the question.'

Kidd and Sabo had had regular conferences together over the last week concerning everything that happened and the progress of his research. Both of them were beginning to notice a slight shift in the behavior of the citadel vampires...like they were wary of them. Kidd suspected it was because of Ace's outburst and wanted to keep everything they discovered between the two of them, for now.

As they knew going in, these vampires were only truly loyal to Whitebeard. If one of their own was threatened, it could spark internal conflict.

So engrossed in his thoughts, Sabo ran right into someone.

"Ah, pardon me...oh, Law."

The tattooed vampire dusted off his kimono and nodded to him.

"Sabo-ya...something on your mind? You seem distracted." The pureblood shrugged.

"Just a lot to think about..." He cleared his throat, "Anyway, tell me, how is Luffy's injury healing? I was just there, and it looked better." The human's residual limb had been wrapped snugly in bandages, but based on Luffy's healthier complexion, he assumed everything was going smoothly.

"He's healing nicely." Law explained, pulling out his tablet and flipping to what he assumed was Luffy's page, "His vitals continue to be good, though he's lost weight, understandably. I am hopeful that as his diet improves, so will his general health."

"I see...and what about the new tag?" Sabo had been told about the shackles but wasn't sure how well they worked in comparison to the standard, subcutaneous tag. In response, Law showed him the screen, which displayed Luffy's heart rate, location, and other numbers.

"They're fully operational." The doctor said before putting the tablet away. He bowed and went to leave but stopped as if remembering something. "Oh, also, the sign-up sheet I put out for Luffy-ya already has quite a few interested parties."

"Really?" Sabo questioned, recalling what Law was talking about. After discussing it with him, they'd agreed to allow other vampires in the citadel opportunities to take Luffy out of his cell. With how busy Sabo was (with the whole 'D' research thing and Kidd's other objectives) it was clear others would need to be recruited.

Though Sabo had been quite reluctant to allow other vampires near Luffy.

"Take a look."

The pureblood bent down to read over the list Law had quickly pulled up on his tablet, curious who was interested.

Some were obvious like Ace, Doma (Luffy had saved his life after all), and even Law himself. Others were a bit more surprising.



'Thatch, Blenheim...some of Law's subordinates...Marco!?' He certainly hadn't considered the previous Lord would be interested...wait...was that-

"K-Kidd!?" Sabo exclaimed, grabbing the tablet from Law, "He doesn't have time for that!"

"Apparently, he does." The doctor chuckled, taking the pad back from him, "Needless to say, we have no shortage of willing vampires. And, though it may be your desire to keep Luffy-ya separated and...non-integrated, it will be good for him to get used to other vampires in the citadel."

"Y-Yeah..." He replied, running a hand through his hair. Law smirked and brushed past him, whispering to him as he passed.

"Are you jealous, Sabo-ya?"

"Not at all!" He responded lowly, straightening his kimono. He definitely wasn't jealous. Nope, not him. Luffy was just going to go on walks with other vampires...no big deal.

It was just that the walks were kind of their special time...and it wasn't solely *theirs* anymore.

No big deal.

Sabo huffed and continued along the corridor, wishing with all his heart he had a true connection to Luffy like Ace did. Would...being *brothers* help bring them closer?

---

While Ace finished cleaning out the depository tanks (as he did every day until his punishment was over), he went over what Thatch had been teaching him over the past week. Though he wouldn't be able to actually see or interact with Lu for a while longer, he wanted to be prepared.

He was determined not to scare the human, his little brother, anymore. Or come off as *creepy*, as he had apparently become a master of (according to Thatch). Thankfully, the older vampire had broken it down into just a few simple steps that were easy to remember:

**Step 1: Remember how he's related to you.**

'Luffy's my little brother first, human second.' He rehearsed, scrubbing particularly hard as he concentrated.

**Step 2: There is no need to be the dominant one in the relationship, you are equals.**

'No persuasion or talking down to him...' Ace continued, feeling a pit in his stomach form, recalling all the times he'd talked to Luffy like he was nothing but a pet. It was no wonder the boy was still so nervous around him.

Suddenly, Thatch's voice echoed in his head:

*'Now Acey, this step may be hard because the rest of us probably won't change. To us, he's human. To you, he's your brother. For now, you'll just have to deal with it...but maybe*

*someday we can do something about it, so that everyone sees him like you do.'*

### **Step 3: If you think it's creepy, it probably is.**

Ace rolled his eyes at that one. He wasn't going to be creepy anymore (having sadly concluded that Thatch was right). No more grabbing Luffy by the jaw or demanding respect...no more forcing affection on him. If he didn't want to be hugged, Ace would respect that.

*'It'll take time to repair the relationship and build trust, real trust. Be patient, and don't get frustrated. Let him take the lead and move at his own pace.'*

The freckled vampire sighed and hopped down, finally finished with his disgusting chore. Yeah, he felt that he was ready to re-start his familial relationship with Lu. It couldn't be that hard! Leaving the Depository behind, Ace began to make his way back to his room for a shower.

Otherwise, he would stink up the whole citadel.

As he walked, he examined the stables, now back to functioning normally after Kidd oversaw some basic reinforcements. Almost all of the humans were outside, some laying in the grass or sleeping peacefully. Ace smiled, figuring Luffy would be pleased things were finally going back to normal.

He glanced at Stable G, smile falling at the sight of Luffy's old pen, completely empty. Would they re-fill it or put Lu back? Only time would tell.

His gaze moved slowly from Stable G to E, which was just on the other side of the courtyard. Ace didn't expect to see anything of interest, but surprisingly, something caught his attention. In one of the outdoor pens closest to him, were two humans that were very familiar.

It was the old man and green-haired woman from the raid, the two that knew Luffy.

Honestly, he'd forgotten they had been captured as well.

Ace immediately changed his course and began to head towards them. If they were close with his newly discovered little brother, this could be his chance to glean some information. Where was Luffy from? How had he survived all this time alone?

*Who killed his family?*

It didn't take long for the woman to notice his approach, face paling considerably. Though, recalling the last time he saw her, she looked much better. Less...almost dead.

"Y-You're..." She whispered from the chair she sat in, swallowing audibly. The old man stood to his feet with effort, leaning on a wooden cane for support. Both of them wore the required human garb.

"What do you want?" The male asked, glaring at him from beyond the bars.

"Information...if you have it." Ace replied, sitting down and crossing his legs in an attempt to appear less intimidating. The humans glanced at each other before meeting his gaze again.

"I doubt we know anything of value to you..." The woman meekly put in, hands grasping at her trousers.

"I want to know about Luffy, anything you can tell me." He clarified, earning a frown from the old man.

"So that *was* him they brought back...is he...all right? He looked terribly hurt..." Ace tilted his head before realizing he was talking about when they'd retrieved him from Upper Yard. His initial arrival wasn't quite so obvious.

"He's healing...but it'll take time. A group convinced him to escape and things got...complicated. I won't go into the details, but he's safe now."

The old man hummed while the woman let out a sigh. It seems they were both worried about the boy, and rightfully so. He'd been through hell.

"...now I suppose you want to know what we know?"

"Yes...please." Ace quickly added, trying to be cordial. The man sighed and sat back down when his knees started to knock together.

"Frankly, you probably know more than we do at this point. He showed up to Red Town the day before the raid, alone and very dusty." Ace nodded and scooted closer, "He seemed like a kind boy and had decent stuff to trade, so I lent him a bed. Didn't even flinch when he saw Makino, so I knew he was the honorable sort."

The woman, Makino, smiled softly at the memory.

"After talking with us and doing some sowing as part of his payment, he discovered that Makino didn't have much time left and was planning on surrendering herself to a nearby patrol." The man frowned, "He objected, of course, but after figuring out it was either that or see her die, Luffy offered to take her outside himself despite his obvious dislike of the idea."

Ace blinked, taking it all in. The old man cleared his throat before continuing.

"Of course, your raid ruined that plan. We secretly hoped he'd gotten away, but apparently he didn't...pity that."

"What do you mean?"

"The lad had obviously lived a hard life." The human said slowly, "But he was cheerful and happy with what he had. However, at the mere mention of vampires, he...how should I put this...*deflated*, like the very idea of giving up your freedom was equal to death."

Ace bit the inside of his cheek. He didn't want to admit it, but he felt he knew about that trait already. Luffy's initial reaction to the tag, his perpetual unhappiness in the citadel... *freedom* was more important to him than life itself, and he'd stolen it from him.

"I'm afraid that's all we know." Makino added, "We barely knew him for a full day...if only he'd moved on and not tried to help me." The old man moved to comfort the woman when she began to cry.

Realizing he wasn't going to get anything else, Ace stood to leave.

"It wasn't your fault, Makino." The old human assured, chuckling under his breath, "That little Monkey brat chose to stay and help...because he's kind and didn't want to see you suffer. You don't find many people like that anymore."

Ace stopped and mouthed the strange descriptor the human used.

*Monkey?* Why compare him to a monkey...?

Shrugging, Ace jogged back towards the main entrance of the compound, pleased with what he'd managed to discover, meager though it was. Maybe when he got closer to Luffy, he would ask him about his past?

That is, only if he was willing.

---

Sabo knocked on Kidd's door when he arrived, needing to go over some documents and other economic inquiries with him. When the pureblood Lord called for him to enter, he gently opened the heavy door and closed it behind him.

"Kidd? Where-"

"In here, 'Bo." The red-head said, drawing his attention to the back room, or 'workshop' as Kidd preferred to call it. For as long as he could remember, Kidd had loved machines. He was always working on something, whether it was fixing a broken converter or creating something totally new.

Today, Sabo wasn't sure what the other pureblood was doing. As expected, Kidd was hunkered down in his workshop, covered in grease and other machine fluids. Thankfully, he wasn't wearing expensive clothing that befitted a citadel Lord, but a pair of overalls, a cap, and his signature goggles that hung loosely around his neck.

He didn't look up when Sabo entered, focused completely on typing something on his holographic keyboard.

"I have some documents here that you need to sign-"

"Just a second..." Kidd interrupted, still typing. Sabo huffed and waited until the other finished, pressing the enter key with a flourish. "...and there it goes."

"What are you working on?" Sabo asked, curious what had so demanded his friend's attention. Kidd smirked, tapping on the projection and swiveling it around for his perusal. He stepped forward and read through the long message, eyes growing wider with each line. "W-What...are you serious!?"

"Yeah." Kidd stood up and pulled a pair of gloves on, "Now that everything's calmed down, it's time to move forward with the plan."

In short, the message detailed an invitation to the three citadels that shared their hunting grounds: Upper Yard, Germa, and Rain Base. Though the reasons were somewhat vague, it was obvious that Kidd wanted to have a conference with their Lords.

"B-But you said the prototype wasn't complete yet!"

"It is now." Kidd replied, placing his hand on a round, metallic machine about four feet in circumference. "When they see this baby in action, they'll be dying to help us out."

"What if it doesn't work!?" Sabo continued, now pacing back and forth, "A-And have you forgotten the tension between us and Upper Yard right now! I know you, Kidd, and I don't think this will end peacefully! As your advisor, I'm *advising* you to rescind this immediately!"

"Relax, I'm not an idiot." He said, motioning for him to calm down, "I've also sent an invitation to an elder who can oversee and mitigate the conversation. One Phoenix said he and Trafalgar trusted."

Sabo blinked and worked to calm himself down. Okay...that was good.

"...and if this goes poorly? You know there will be a huge influx of hunts and possibly altercations between citadels."

"I'm confident we can work something out." Kidd answered, reclining in his chair, "Enel can kiss my ass, and Germa's unlikely to be interested, but Crocodile...he's a man of vision. Hopefully I can get him on my side."

"...and then what?"

Kidd smirked.

"Then we can start restoring the world and expanding the citadel. Our little corner of the wasteland will become green and thriving again...rich with resources." The red-head hummed, enjoying the vision, "No one will want for blood, all the wild humans will be properly handled...doesn't that sound amazing, Sabo?"

The blonde sighed but smiled back. This had been Kidd's dream from when they were kids. He glanced over to a picture hanging on the wall, a painting that detailed the beautiful, blue ocean and a boat dancing on the waves, something neither of them had seen before in real life.

More than anything, Kidd wanted to see the world like it once was.

It was a crazy dream to many, but one Sabo could respect. Hopefully, the other Lords would understand his conviction and be drawn in by the wonder of his new contraption. The last thing they wanted was to spark a conflict and draw the Council's ire.

---

## Upper Yard

"The nerve of that brat!" Enel screeched, angrily shoving the tablet into Ohm's hands, "He thinks after humiliating me in front of the Charlotte emissary, he can just invite me over for tea!?"

"...he's not inviting you for tea-"

"I KNOW, IDIOT! IT'S A FIGURE OF SPEECH!" His subordinate bowed immediately, knowing better than to incur his wrath. After what happened, Ohm, Satori, and Shura had already been punished, but his fury had yet to be quenched.

Not only had the incident blown his chances of joining the Charlotte family, but he'd lost resources and, worst of all, *reputation*. Some of his regular trade partners were questioning his honor after hearing rumors that he'd stolen from the OH SO PERFECT AND REPUTABLE clan of Whitebeard!

"How shall we respond, Master?"

Enel snarled and crushed the cup of freshly harvested blood currently in his hand into pieces. Oh, he'd oblige the brat and attend his conference or whatever, but only to exact his revenge. He was much smarter and older, a Master and Lord of many vampires! Akagami's whelp was still a child with no idea how to rule or demand complete obedience from his people.

He would ensure the talk went poorly and *ruined* that damned citadel!

---

## Germa

"What is it? I'm busy?" A large, blonde pureblood hissed, not looking up from his work. On the table in front of him was a human, though from the looks of it, its usefulness had almost expired. He would need to procure more subjects before the week was over.

"Forgive me, Sir, I will be brief." Hi subordinate replied, bowing deeply, "We have received an invitation to attend a conference at the Moby Dick, lead by their new pureblood leader. It seems he has some important issues to discuss and claims to have something that could...and I quote, 'change the world'."

Judge snorted, adjusting the scalpel in his hand.

"And this concerns us, why? I have no time to spare for newly crowned Lords who have barely reached their second decade of life."

"...he also states that, whatever happens, it will affect the human hunts. If I may speak plainly, Sir?"

"Granted."

"This missive comes across as something of a threat. Whatever he is planning, would it not be prudent to investigate? It would not bode well if our human stores-"

Judge spun around; anger clear on his face.

"Are you insinuating that we cannot defend ourselves against them!? That they are a *threat* to us!?" He moved to kill the man but was stopped when one of his children blocked his attack. Judge glowered down at Reiju. "Why did you stop me?"

"I believe he may be right, Father." Reiju stated, waving the nervous vampire away, "Eustass Kidd is Akagami's son and should not be underestimated. Whatever he has planned will apparently effect everyone in the area and I feel that we should send someone to hear him out, at least. If he is determined to threaten our territory, then we will kill him."

Judge hummed and studied his only daughter, her pink hair combed and perfect as always. She was the oldest and certainly cunning...perhaps she was onto something.

"Very well, but I refuse to send someone of importance on such a bothersome errand." Judge turned back to the table to resume his work, "Notify Sanji. He will go and report back."

"Sanji?" Reiji questioned, "Are you sure?"

"He's useless to me, who better to send?" Judge scoffed in disgust at the thought of his third son. Though a pureblood, he was incredibly weak and lacked decisiveness. More than once he'd been caught attempting to free their human prisoners or *feeding* them. Oh, how Judge wanted to be rid of him, but with the Council's constant scrutiny of their work, it would have to wait.

Maybe, if he was lucky, one of Whitebeard's would take care of that for him...

---

## Rain Base

Crocodile took a long sip from his goblet as he listened to reports from his attendants. He sat on his throne with two humans on chains nearby in case he needed a refill. They cowered and lowered their heads to him, as they should.

After all, he was bothering to take care of them.

"Our resources are where they should be, and no issues have been reported among the humans." Daz Bones informed him, "Though the recent activity of the Moby Dick may be cause for concern."

Crocodile hummed and brought a cigar to his lips. Those fools were always up to something...

"They have a new Lord now, correct? What do we know about him?"

"If I may...Sir Crocodile." A female voice interrupted, drawing everyone's attention. A lovely vampiress entered the chamber, heels making a pleasant sound against the floor. She had long, dark hair and mischievous eyes.

"Nico Robin, what do you know?" The beauty always seemed to know more than everyone else in the room, but whether or not she *shared* her knowledge, was a different story. In Crocodile's eyes, she was dangerous, but her usefulness currently outweighed the risk.

"The new Lord's name is Eustass Kidd, Akagami's only son." Robin reported, coming to a stop in front of the two humans, "Interestingly enough, he has sent us an invitation to join him in one week's time for a demonstration and discussion of some kind."

The woman reached down and pet the hair of the humans, making them flinch.

"What kind of demonstration?"

"I haven't the faintest." She admitted, pulling a piece of dried meat from her pocket and offering it to the young, female human, "But, given the nature of his letter, he seems to think it may upset the balance of power around the old city. Though I am but a humble advisor, it may be worth hearing him out."

Robin gave him a look as she straightened out, one that meant she knew more than what she was letting on but wanted to play with him and see what he did. It also meant that she wanted to go with him. Difficult woman.

He didn't particularly want to go to Whitebeard's citadel, not after their falling out all those years ago. But he was a curious man and didn't want to miss out on the most interesting thing to happen in their quiet territory for quite a while.

Plus, he wanted to hear more about what happened with that idiot, Enel. From the rumors, it sounded like Phoenix had been busy (which was a rarity in and of itself).

"Then send your response." Crocodile replied, motioning for one of the two humans to be brought forward. The young female quickly handed the meat she'd been given to the male and shuffled forward when the chain connected to her collar forced her onto his throne. "Let's see what he has to present, hmmm?"

His eyes turned red and he slowly bit into the neck presented to him, savoring the lovely taste.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! So this is unfortunately the last chapter I have completed (for now). I am currently working on Chapter 19, but it may take a little while :'). Thank you for your patience in advance and I'll see you next time!

Luffy sat on his bed with his cheek resting against his knee, gazing out the window. The weather in the citadel was particularly beautiful today and the pink blossoms on some of trees were blown throughout the courtyard, riding the gentle breeze.

Two days had gone by since Sabo came to visit him, and there had been no change in his routine. However, from what he'd observed in the courtyard, the vampires appeared busier than normal...like they were prepping for something.

Armed guards were everywhere, and the grass had been trimmed just the day before.

He was tempted to ask Torao or one of the other 'keepers' (as he'd learned they were called) but didn't want to draw too much attention to himself and risk making them suspicious.

Not that he'd try anything...escape was pretty much impossible for the time being. He hoped that by being obedient, they'd eventually let him out of the tower (which would make it easier for possible rescuers to reach him). Sabo had seemed optimistic that he'd be returned to the stables, but Torao hadn't said anything about it.

'If I stay locked up in here,' He mused with a huff, shifting his weight on the mattress, 'There's no way Zoro and the others will make it past the guards.' Just as he thought that, the lock to the door jangled, making him sit up and turn his attention away from the window.

They'd already taken away his lunch dishes...so who was it?

The barred door swung open, revealing a familiar vampire who flashed him a soft smile.

"Doma?" He asked, swinging his legs off the mattress so they were facing each other. The vampire's monkey friend chittered on his shoulder; tail wrapped around the other's neck. Luffy hadn't seen the dark-haired vampire since his retrieval.

"Hey...how are you doing, kid?"

"I'm okay..." He replied, leaning to his left to peer out the still open door. Normally, his visitors would close it right away. "Erm...you left the door open." The vampire chuckled.

"Yeah, I know." Doma lifted something in his hand for Luffy to see. "That's because Law finally decided to clear you to go outside on walks again, and I get the honor of being your first chaperone."

Luffy's eyes lit up. They were at long last going to let him venture out of his gilded cage! And with the weather so nice, it was bound to be-

His excitement died when his gaze focused on what was held in Doma's fist. It was a slim, black band, reminiscent of what Zoro had been forced to wear. The vampire followed his eyes and huffed, holding the thing out in front of him so Luffy could see it better.

"Unfortunately, due to what happened, you'll have to wear this anytime you leave this room."

"W-What is it?" Luffy questioned, vividly recalling his friend being electrocuted by the silver collar.

"Basically, it'll give us more...control, should something happen." Doma explained, walking up to him, "Don't worry, it won't hurt you or anything, but it *can* dispense a sedative that will knock you out in about five seconds."

So, essentially, if Luffy tried to escape or did anything remotely suspicious, the vampires could press a button and put him to sleep. In addition to the shackles he already wore, the vampires really weren't messing around. He swallowed, not wanting the thing near him.

"Can I refuse?" Doma shrugged.

"I suppose so, but that means you'll be stuck in here and not allowed to go out. It's your choice." Luffy bit the inside of his cheek, considering his options. He desperately wanted to get out of the stuffy room, roll around in the grass, and feel the sun again.

But that meant giving up even more freedom than he already had.

Doma sat next to him, staying silent and giving him time to think. The monkey made a quiet noise and pulled at Luffy's hair, making him turn and pet its head. Even just this simple interaction made his heart swell with happiness.

Jaw set, Luffy made his decision.

"Okay."

He didn't move as Doma reached around his neck and secured the band. It was cool against his flushed skin and surprisingly comfortable, though he jumped when Doma pressed something that made a beeping sound.

"...that should do it." The vampire muttered. The band was similar to the manacles around his ankles, leaving almost no room for air between the metal and his skin. He reached up and ran his fingers over the smooth texture until Doma removed them. "I don't recommend messing with it too much. If you try to remove it forcefully, it'll put you out and send us an emergency signal, understand?"

Luffy nodded, hand shaking a bit. And he'd thought the vampires had control over him *before*. He supposed it was natural for them to be cautious considering they now knew the secret of his blood. To them, he was a valuable resource they didn't want to lose.

Doma placed a hand under his left arm and helped him stand up, motioning towards the still open door. Luffy wrapped his remaining limb around his stomach and obediently followed the vampire out, eyeing the two stationed guards warily. They held what looked like metal prods in their arms and he deduced they were those 'electric rods' he'd heard about.

"Thanks for all your hard work." Doma praised, making the two guards nod to him, "I'll bring him back when we're through."

With that, Luffy trotted after the vampire, taking in his surroundings as quickly as he could. There wasn't much activity around his room, and the walls were made of gray stone that curved around them as they descended a surprisingly wide staircase. The closer they got to the ground level, the more he could hear voices and the sound of work being done.

Luffy instinctively stuck close to Doma, nervous about being around so many people again after so long. The vampire thankfully didn't push him away and simply placed a firm guiding hand on his upper back.

When they emerged onto the bottom floor, Luffy immediately felt like everyone was staring at him. They were in what he recognized as the gathering hall of the main building and there were quite a few vampires around.

"Come on," Doma whispered, guiding him forward and out of his stock-still position, "let's go outside." Luffy nodded, trying to ignore the muttered conversations and subtle finger pointing occurring around him. He wasn't certain if it was malicious or just curious, but he didn't want to find out.

Moving down the steps onto the grass in the courtyard made Luffy forget all of his anxiety for a few seconds. He tentatively placing one bare toe onto the soft, green foliage, and couldn't hold back a smile. It was just as amazing as he remembered. Taking a deep breathe he trotted forward (doing his best not to trip over his shackles), in awe of the beauty around him.

There really was no compare to the desolate wastes outside. If it meant getting to experience *this*, he was willing to deal with a collar.

"It's nice, isn't it?" Doma said with a smirk, always staying within a few feet of him, "We've been working hard to make it extra pretty so our... *visitors* will hopefully be impressed." Luffy stopped at that.

"Who's coming?" He asked before immediately slapping himself inwardly. If he started asking questions...

"Just some other vampires from the area." Doma replied, ruffling his hair, "Don't worry about it." Luffy figured that if they wanted him to know details, they would tell him. But for now, that was all the information he would get.

The vampire then led him across the yard to a familiar creek, the very same one he'd met Stefan the dog at so many weeks before. Luffy wasted no time lowering himself down onto the grass so he could enjoy the relaxing sound of running water. Doma didn't join him and reached down to pick up a smooth rock instead.

"Hey, kid, check this out!" He exclaimed before throwing the stone into the creek where it... jumped? Luffy leaned forward, eyes big as he watched it jump one more time before finally falling into the water.

"Woah...how'd you do that!?"

Doma closed one eye and laughed.

"It's called 'stone skipping'. Pretty cool, huh? The idea is to see how many times you can get it to skip before it falls in." The vampire picked up another one, examined it for a moment, and then threw it again, making it jump across the surface of the creek. "The smoother the rock, the more skips you'll get."

Luffy grinned and shuffled in place, amazed at how he could make the rock defy gravity.

"Do it again!"

Doma obliged, sending one, two, and then three stones skipping in succession. It was one of the most amazing things Luffy had ever seen! While the vampire showed off, his monkey friend climbed down his body and began to nudge against his knee.

He was distracted from Doma's skills when the front gate rumbled open with a low groan. Luffy found himself leaning slightly to catch a glimpse of the outside, of the wastes...of *freedom*, but quickly looked down, not wanting to give himself false hope (or suffer the reminder that, no matter how nice the citadel was, it was still a prison).

A few trucks passed through and then the gate shut, effectively shutting out the dry, hot air he'd felt blow against his face. Turning back to Doma, he tried to refocus, petting the little monkey monotonously.

"Luffy?" A voice said, making him jump and Doma straighten up. A familiar form approached slowly, holding a bucket and a rag.

"...Ace." He greeted, honestly a little confused at how cautiously the vampire was approaching him. Normally, he was very touchy and in his face. His brother smiled warmly and walked a little bit closer, bringing with him an unfortunate smell. Luffy scrunched up his nose while Doma made a show of pinching his.

"Good grief, Ace, you *reek*!"

"Yeah, that's what happens when you clean the tanks out." Ace replied with a shrug, "I think I'm used to it by now." He placed his materials on the ground and examined the stone in Doma's hand. The older vampire smirked and tossed it to him.

"You want to show us what you've got? Smelly or not, might be fun."

Ace returned Doma's smirk and took his position next to the water, winding up. Luffy leaned forward in anticipation, eager to see more stone magic. His brother threw the rock and it jumped, *five times!*

"Wow!" Luffy exclaimed, holding the monkey tight in excitement, "That was more than Doma!"

"Damn straight." Ace said while picking up another rock, "There's an art to it, Lu...just takes practice." He nodded and quickly requested the vampire show him more. Ace smiled and threw another, sending it flying across the water at high speeds.

"Heh, you really *are* good at that." Doma admitted, shifting his weight, and crossing his arms. Ace punched him in the arm playfully.

"Don't feel bad, Doma, not everyone has the gift." The vampire then shuffled for a moment like he was considering something. Luffy tensed instinctively when Ace turned to him, scratching his head like he was unsure. "W-Would you like me to teach you, Lu? To skip stones, I mean."

Luffy swallowed, not sure how to respond. Was it okay? He glanced at the water, recalling how the rocks bounced and jumped. It *did* look like a lot of fun...

"W-Will you?" Ace's lips curled into a blinding grin.

"Of course! C'mere, Lu, the first step is to make sure you're in the right stance."

Luffy carefully pushed the monkey off him and stood to his feet, moving to stand next to Ace. The vampire didn't touch him and verbally instructed him how to place his feet. When he was a little off, Ace demonstrated so he could copy him.

"Like this?" He asked, winding up with a stone in his left hand. Ace nodded.

"Yeah, just like that. Give it a go, Lu!"

He was a little nervous he'd mess up, but gave it his all, nonetheless. With a flick of his wrist, Luffy sent the small rock flying across the creek, where it bounced once before falling through the water's surface.

"I did it!" He cheered, jumping up and down. Ace grinned and Doma laughed.

"You're a natural, kid."

"Seriously, that was great!" Ace continued, patting him on the back before recoiling, like he'd done something wrong. Luffy tilted his head in confusion. The vampire was acting kind of strange. "Wanna try again?"

Deciding it wasn't that important, Luffy focused on the task at hand: getting more than one bounce.

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Ace was having a hard time controlling his excitement. For the first time in a while, he'd coaxed a real smile out of Luffy, and the kid wasn't shying away from him. Currently, his little brother was winding up to try again, tongue sticking out of his mouth a little as he concentrated.

'Thatch's steps are working!' He thought, making sure to encourage Luffy every chance he got, 'We're actually bonding!' On top of that, the boy's wounds looked to be healing well.

He glanced down to the dark collar around Luffy's neck, eyes softening in sympathy. Law had informed everyone that signed up to chaperone the kid that as part of their security protocol, he was not to leave his room without it on. Ace understood why it was necessary but didn't like that they kept adding to his shackles, metaphorically and physically.

How was he supposed to earn Luffy's trust when they kept shoving him back into the darkness of captivity? If there was one thing he'd learned about his little brother, it was that freedom was incredibly important to him and as long as they kept him locked up in the citadel, Ace would never get to see his true personality shine.

He'd caught glimpses of it, like when he'd discovered pancakes or even when they'd first met, and he'd forced him out of the tiny crevice. Luffy was strong willed, goofy, a fighter, and so much more.

Hopefully...someday, he would get to witness it in all its glory. That would be the day he could truly call himself Luffy's family.

"Ace, did you see?" The kid chirped, bringing him out of his thoughts, "I got it to jump twice this time!"

"I did! Before you know it, you'll be throwing better than both of us." Luffy smiled sheepishly, obviously pleased with the praise. It wasn't as big or as bright as Ace knew he could grin, but it was still genuine and that made happiness course through his veins.

"That really *was* impressive." A new voice put in, making Ace grimace. Of all the vampires to walk up during his bonding time with Lu...it had to be *him*. "It's good to see you up and about, Luffy. I can already tell you're feeling better."

"Mn." The boy affirmed, smile dimming slightly in the pureblood's presence, but returning seconds later. For whatever reason, Luffy seemed particularly nervous around purebloods. "Ace is teaching me how to do it right!" Sabo's sharp eyes slid over to his, appearing jovial and friendly, but with a veiled challenge that he picked up on right away.

"I see. Perhaps he could teach me as well."

Ace's eye twitched, but he forced himself to stay somewhat friendly, for Luffy's sake. No way was he compromising the fragile bond he'd managed to form for Sabo of all vampires.

"I guess so...unless you're too busy, Lord Second. We wouldn't want to distract you from your *important responsibilities*."

Sabo just smiled at him; eyes closed.

"Not at all, I would be honored to learn from a *master*." The pureblood stepped forward and made a show of patting Luffy's head, which made Ace's blood boil (but he managed to stop himself from hissing).

He morphed his scowl into a smirk, picked up a stone, and threw it swiftly, getting a respectable four skips. Turning to Sabo, he crossed his arms.

"And that's how you do it. Surely a pureblood doesn't need much more than a... demonstration." The blonde vampire's lip curled up into a mischievous grin as he took a rock from Doma and gently moved Luffy aside. Pushing up the sleeves of his kimono, Sabo tossed the stone, making it dance across the water.

One, two, three four, five, six...*seven* times!?

Ace gaped while Luffy cheered.

"Wow, that was amazing, Sabo! Have you done this before?"

"Beginner's luck." The vampire said with a chuckle, sending Ace a subtle smirk as Luffy praised his performance, "It wasn't that hard."

He grit his teeth in frustration. The bastard was stealing all of *his brother's* attention!

"Not bad...for a noble."

"Thank you." Sabo replied, placing his hands in his sleeves, "For a such a simplistic game, it is surprisingly satisfying." They stared, inwardly glaring at each other for a few seconds until Luffy tugged on the pureblood's kimono.

"Ne, could I try again?"

"Sure, Lu!" Ace exclaimed, jumping in, and leading the boy past Sabo, back to the creek, "Here, let me get you some ammo."

While Luffy kept throwing rocks under Doma's supervision, Ace and Sabo moved to stand on either side of him. The pureblood was obviously attempting to muscle his way into their game, and it was starting to piss him off. Doma eyed him with a raised eyebrow, recognizing how much tension there was in the air.

Thankfully, Luffy seemed oblivious to their intrinsic fight and continued to enjoy himself. Though, for all his trying, he had yet to get more than two skips. Would he be better with his right hand?

At the thought, a wave of anger crashed over him and he turned his attention to where the boy's limb used to be. All that was left now was a stump thanks to Upper Yard's insolence. If only he could just-

"Aw...it fell in." Luffy pouted after yet another rock failed to jump. Ace forced his anger down and chuckled.

"Don't worry, Lu. You'll get it eventually."

"Indeed." Sabo put in, "The more you practice, the better you'll become."

Luffy nodded and knelt down to pick up another stone but yelped when its pointed edge sliced across his palm. When he stood, there was blood flowing from a shallow cut across his only remaining hand. Needless to say, all three of the vampires crowded around him, trying to see it and stop the bleeding.

"Ouch...ow, ow..." Luffy whimpered as Ace grabbed a clean rag from his bag and wrapped the injury.

"It's pretty shallow, so it should scab over soon." He explained, earning a small noise of affirmation from Luffy. Ace glanced around instinctively until he recalled that it was unlikely for anyone to get excited over his brother's blood. It didn't smell the same.

"I think that's enough stone skipping for today." Doma put in, making Luffy droop. The poor kid had obviously been having fun. "Let's stop by the infirmary and have Law look at it, just in case." Ace and Sabo made to follow but were stopped by the older vampire's firm stare.

Both of them sulked as the boy was led away but perked right up when he turned around and shyly waved at them, lips curling up into a soft smile. It was absolutely adorable.

"I blame you completely." Ace hissed, maintaining his friendly air for Lu's eyes only. Sabo raised his hand to the boy as well, tight lipped grin never failing.

"Says the vampire who smells like garbage. I bet his hand slipped after spending so long inhaling such toxicity."

"Blue blood asshole."

"Rude commoner."

"Bastard."

*"Bloody nuisance."*

When Luffy and Doma finally entered the main building, they turned and growled at each other. They'd been quietly quarreling for some time now, so maybe it was time they moved on from petty insults.

"Perhaps I should take you up on that offer you made a while back." Ace spit, claws elongating, "If I remember correctly, you didn't seem to mind the idea of getting your ass kicked publicly." At this point, a crowd had started to gather, watching them closely. Sabo scoffed.



"Oh please, I was simply being cordial. There is no way a turned such as yourself could match me in combat." Just as they were about to leap at each other, someone cleared their throat, drawing their attention away from each other.

"Oi, you two done with your little *measuring* contest?" It was Kidd, and while he appeared amused, his hard stare also suggested he wasn't pleased. "Cause I think you're done."

Almost immediately Sabo relaxed his posture and brushed off his kimono while Ace took a deep breathe to calm himself. But he didn't back off because of Kidd.

He glanced up and met the gaze of his sire, who was seated on a balcony railing. Marco's eyes were narrowed, and he motioned upwards with his chin, a clear signal for Ace to report to him and answer for his behavior.

Great. Just great.

He blamed Sabo for everything.

---

Law huffed as he signed yet another document, making sure to keep his desk orderly and contained. Ever since their return from the Upper Yard 'processing outpost' and the announcement that some very high profile purebloods would be arriving within the week, it seemed like his workload had all but doubled.

'Honestly, what is Eustass-ya thinking...!' He mused, scribbling his signature on the next document and placing it on the ever-growing pile of paper, 'Gathering so many Lords together will certainly cause arguments and confrontation.'

Especially with Upper Yard.

A soft knock on his door drew his gaze up and away from the endless paperwork.

"Cap?" Penguin asked, peeking inside, "You got a second?"

"Yes...I suppose so..." Law replied, placing his pen down, "What is it?"

"Doma's here with Luffy...apparently the kid accidentally hurt himself." He raised an eyebrow and stood to his feet, straightening his kimono. Today was the first day the human was permitted to resume his walks, and he'd already managed to injure himself?

When he emerged into the infirmary's main area, he was greeted by a sheepish looking Doma and Luffy, who had a rag clenched tightly in his fist.

"What happened?" Law asked, striding forward to grip Luffy's wrist and open his hand. The boy winced slightly in discomfort, but didn't cry out, indicating the wound must not be too bad.

"Ah...we were skipping rocks and he cut his hand on one." Doma explained, his monkey companion scurrying across his shoulders to sniff at Luffy's hair, "I don't think it's that deep, thankfully."

True to his suspicion, the cut was very shallow and had already stopped bleeding. Just to be safe, Law tugged the human over to a chair so he could bandage and disinfect the wound. Luffy's eyes wandered around the room as Law worked, gaze lingering on the now empty area for humans.

"Ne...where's Makino? Is she okay?"

"Makino?" He asked while dabbing the cut with an alcohol swab. The name wasn't familiar to him.

"She was in there when I came with Sabo." Luffy continued, "Miss Maki was really sick..." At that, Law realized who the boy was referring to: the woman they'd picked up at the human colony. She had recovered well (as he'd predicted) and was currently living in the stables with the rest of the humans.

"She's fine, as is the old man we picked up with her."

Luffy's eyes brightened and he visibly relaxed.

"Thank goodness..."

Law found it interesting how attached the boy seemed to be to them. It was unlikely they had known each other for very long considering how humans were always moving, hardly ever staying in one place.

Just as he finished wrapping the bandages around Luffy's hand, something caught his eye. On the inside of the human's forearm was a small patch of...honestly, he wasn't sure what. It was about the size of a small coin, not completely circular, and was pitch black, standing out against his paler skin.

'That wasn't there before...'

Law hummed, grabbed a rag, and began to scrub at it, figuring it was some dirt or something that had gotten smudged on the human's limb.

It didn't come off.

Discarding the cloth, he delicately ran his thumb over the spot, frowning when he felt the hardness. It wasn't raised necessarily but felt almost like a hardened shell that had formed on the outside of the human's normally soft and vulnerable skin. Curious, he dragged his elongated claw over it with a firm pressure, eyes widening when the sharp nail broke, unable to pierce the strange substance.

"Law?" Doma asked, "Something wrong?"

At the other's question, the spot faded away, disappearing into Luffy's skin like it was never there. He glanced up to the human, but the kid made no indication that he was aware of it, distracted by the monkey who chattered at him playfully. Law blinked, unsure what to make of it.

"No, everything's fine. The cut wasn't deep so we should be able to remove the bandages either tonight or tomorrow."

"Thanks, Law." Doma put in, bowing shortly, "I'll try to keep him out of trouble...though... actually, could I talk to you for a moment?" Law nodded, motioning for Penguin to lead Luffy out of earshot the second he recognized the other vampire wanted to talk in private. Once the boy was suitably far, Law asked,

"What's on your mind?"

"Earlier, Ace and the Second had a rather *unpleasant* encounter with each other."

"They fought?"

"No..." He continued with a huff, "but it certainly could've escalated into a full-out brawl. I've never seen Ace get so combative with another vampire before."

Law closed his eyes in thought, recalling the pair's confrontation over Luffy and Ace's obvious possessiveness. If Sabo was just as possessive of the boy, they could certainly butt heads in their attempt to one-up each other.

"I see...spread the word to watch them and to keep them separated if we can. With Eustass-ya's meeting quickly approaching, we don't have time to deal with their behavior right now." Though Law technically didn't have the authority to order Sabo to see him and discuss his behavior, he imagined it would have to happen eventually. Learning self-control was something even purebloods had to be taught.

Having two powerful vampires at each other's throats all the time was just asking for trouble.

With that, Doma bowed, retrieved Luffy, and left, leaving Law with his thoughts. Though Ace and Sabo's issues were interesting (and slightly annoying), he couldn't help but focus on the strange mark that appeared on Luffy's skin. He'd never seen anything like it and was concerned that it had nothing to do with his current state of recovery.

Law held up his hand, eyeing the now broken nail with apprehension.

'...I need to speak with Marco-ya and see if he comes to the same conclusion.'

The last thing they needed was Luffy developing abilities early.

---

"Marco, I-"

"I don't want to hear your excuses, yoi." Ace's sire reprimanded, making him flinch. He hated it when the elder vampire got angry...especially at him. Marco sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Openly challenging the current Second...honestly, Ace, what were you thinking?"

Ace bit his lip and shuffled from where he sat, kneeling before Marco in his sire's quarters.

"I-I don't know what came over me, I just..."

"Just what, yoi?"

"I felt *threatened*." Ace admitted, feeling frustration bubble back up inside him. Ever since their first confrontation after Luffy had been retrieved from Upper Yard, it was like Sabo was trying to step all over his growing bond with the boy. He knew what the pureblood said was true...Luffy didn't belong to him, he was property of the citadel.

But...he was also his baby brother, and he was trying so hard to restart their familial relationship from scratch, despite recalling next to nothing about his own past with Luffy's family.

"I understand how you feel, yoi." Marco said in a softer tone than before, "You just found out that you have a brother and with him still recovering, it's natural for anyone to be protective of him. However, that is no excuse for insubordination. Remember what I've taught you Ace...I know you're capable of controlling yourself."

Ace deflated, feeling ashamed of himself for disappointing his sire. Marco seemed to recognize this and knelt in front of him, placing a clawed hand on his head so they were eye to eye.

"You can always come talk to me, Ace. *Anytime*. I'll listen to whatever problems you're dealing with and we can work them out together, yoi. Please...don't shut me out again."

He knew Marco was referring to when he first hid Luffy from him, and it was painful to know that he'd hurt his sire in his frantic desire to protect his little brother. His sire had done nothing to earn his distrust and yet, in his panic...

"I-I won't." Ace stated, voice breaking, "Never again."

Marco smiled softly and stood to his feet, giving Ace his hand so they were both standing.

"Good. Believe it or not, I know a thing or two about insubordination myself, yoi. Pops used to come up with some interesting punishments for me." Ace collected himself and scoffed.

"You? A troublemaker? I don't believe it."

"I was...younger. Less disciplined."

"Oh, do tell."

---

Luffy followed Doma threw the hallway feeling a bit bummed that his fun had been cut short because of a tiny cut. He knew that logically he shouldn't be letting his guard down, but...was it so wrong to enjoy himself a little? In captivity or not, he didn't want to lose himself to loneliness.

Besides, it had actually been kind of nice to play a game with Ace. His brother hadn't scared him like he normally did...and it had helped him relax. When Sabo arrived, Ace's hackles had gone up, but they both skipped stones with him and he, unashamedly, enjoyed the social interaction.

He was so deep in his thoughts; he ran straight into Doma's back when the vampire came to a quick stop.

"...my Lord, good afternoon."

"Yeah, same to you."

Luffy peeked around the vampire to see who he was talking to and instinctively balked. The creature was very large, towering over Doma, and had shoulders about twice as broad as his own. His hair was bright red and his eyes were sharp.

"Ah, that's right, I don't believe you've met Luffy yet." Doma continued, gently pushing him forward (to which he resisted, digging his heels into the floor). The vampire huffed and yanked his body forward with a little more force than before, placing him in front of the other vampire, "Apologies, he's a bit nervous after being alone for so long."

"No worries." The other vampire replied, looking him over with a calculating eye. Luffy wrapped his arm around his belly, feeling uncomfortable under the intense gaze. Strangely enough, he wasn't the only one nervous. Given Doma's pallid face and sweaty palms, whoever this stranger was, he held influence in the citadel and gave off a similar presence to Sabo, leading him to believe he was a pureblood as well.

...just what he needed. More purebloods to worry about.

'At least Sabo's nice.' Luffy mused, thinking this spiky red headed vampire didn't appear quite as...friendly.

"Say Doma, you're chaperoning his walk today, right?" The vampire nodded, "Would you mind if I borrow 'Luffy' for a bit? There're some things I want to ask him." Luffy tensed and he shot Doma a scared look.

No! That was a terrible idea!

"W-Well...I..." Doma stuttered, running a hand through his hair. After a few seconds of thought, the vampire bit his lip and pulled Luffy back to his side. "Given his condition, it may not be a good idea just yet...Sir."

Luffy was touched Doma was attempting to protect him, but it was obvious the other was in a position of authority. And, seeing how his eyes narrowed, he didn't think Doma was going to have a choice in the matter.

"Doma." The pureblood said firmly, "Don't make me turn this request into an order." Luffy watched nervously as the two vampires glared at each other. With a sigh, Doma nodded, sending him an apologetic look.

"Very well. Would you like me to come pick him up when you're through?"

"That won't be necessary." The other responded, reaching forward to grab Luffy's upper arm, "I'll take him back myself."



# Chapter 19

## Chapter Notes

Ya'll...I re-wrote this chapter like...five times. It gave me sooo much trouble XD  
Anyway, as we move closer to the big meeting with the other Lords, some stuff needs to be resolved and things are going to be revealed 0\_0 I hope ya'll enjoy!

(Trigger warning for a panic attack in this chapter)

Luffy couldn't stop himself from shaking as the pureblood dragged him through the citadel. The vampire's grip was strong around his left arm and he walked fast, making it difficult for him to keep up.

He tripped over his ankle shackles more than once, but the other barely seemed to notice.

They got some concerned glances from other vampires and even a few humans as they went, Luffy searching desperately for someone he knew that could save him. Unfortunately, Ace was nowhere in sight and the vampires around didn't seem to want to intervene.

Likely because this particular pureblood was their boss or something...which was weird, because he thought Ace's sire, Marco, was in charge.

Eventually, they arrived at a tall door and Luffy was thrust inside, nearly falling flat on his face from the force. When it was locked behind them, the boy immediately took a step backwards, eyes darting around the unfamiliar space.

It was a sitting room with what looked like multiple adjacent areas connected to it, including a bedroom. Luffy swallowed hard, recognizing that the décor indicated status, as he'd suspected.

"Take a seat." The vampire ordered, walking over to a big chair that was across from a couch. Luffy was reluctant to move but another fierce stare prompted him to pad over to where the pureblood obviously wanted him to sit.

Once seated, Luffy made himself as comfortable as possible, nervous about what the other wanted from him. The only good thing about his position was that he got to face the arched window behind the pureblood, allowing the sun to warm him shaking body.

"So...*Luffy*, right? My name is Eustass Kidd. I am the current Lord of this citadel."

The boy started, shaking intensifying. This was a *Lord*!?

"You can relax. I'm not going to do anything to you." Kidd continued with a snort of amusement as he took in Luffy's clear fear, "I just have a few questions. Answer truthfully, and this will be over quickly."

He nodded, wanting to leave this powerful creature's presence as soon as possible.

"Good. Now...first question. Is Ace truly your brother?"

"H-Half-brother...apparently." Luffy clarified quietly, making Kidd hum.

"Based on what I saw today, you're pretty comfortable with him and, to be honest, I'm surprised. He...no...*we* kidnapped you and are holding you against your will, and yet you seem to be handling it well."

"What are you asking?" Luffy questioned, meeting the other's eyes.

"Franky, I'm wondering what the hell's wrong with you."

His eyes widened at the statement. *What?*

"I mean..." Kidd huffed, leaning back casually, "Had I been kidnapped, tortured, and had a body part forcefully amputated; I'd be pretty messed up. From what I can tell, you've fallen back into a routine quickly and seem fine. So, I'll reiterate. What the hell's wrong with you?"

Luffy had no idea how to respond to that. Was it so weird that he had accepted his injury so quickly? Or that he had enjoyed the game with Ace, Doma, and Sabo earlier?

Kidd leaned forward.

"You a '*demon*', Luffy?"

"W-What?"

"A demon, kid. Unfeeling, dangerous...something...unnatural. Cause that's how you look to me. I may not know much about humans, but I know you're an emotional species and you're much too calm about your whole situation. Captivity appeal to you? Or maybe there's something else..."

Luffy recoiled, honestly offended the vampire would compare him to something like a '*demon*'. His Mom told him that people handle grief differently and he definitely wasn't *unfeeling*.

"I feel! A lot." He insisted, baring his teeth at the pureblood.

"Oh really? Could've fooled me." Kidd retorted, "If you're so *human*, then why are you so apathetic?"

"BECAUSE I'VE SURVIVED WORSE!" Luffy bellowed, all of his fear and frustration exploding out of the space he'd made for it deep inside him. Against his will, tears formed in his eyes and he clutched at his chest.



At his scar.

Kidd said nothing and just watched him closely.

"I-I know how it looks to other people." He whispering, voice breaking, "That I've accepted this messed up situation too quickly. But I know what h-happens when you let it get to you... the pain, loneliness...*terror*."

Memories came screaming back, ones he desperately wanted to forget.

*Of his tormentor and his cruel laugh.*

*Of cages barely large enough for his tiny body.*

*Of teeth meeting skin.*

*Of blood and burning flesh.*

"You break."

---

Kidd stared at the human across from him, now a quivering ball of fear. He'd been scared before, but not like this.

He wasn't a therapist. His probing had not intended to get the boy to release his feelings or whatever. Frankly, it was easier on them if the human accepted his place in the citadel and didn't cause trouble. Kidd had hoped that by riling him up and throwing in the word 'demon', he'd get a reaction from the possible 'D'.

Honestly, he figured that the human's quick recovery from the trauma Upper Yard inflicted and his familiarity with Ace, Law, Marco and the others had to do with his bloodline.

'I may have hit a sore spot by accident.'

"Hey-"

Luffy's breathing was no longer even and his pupils were dilated. Additionally, the boy's skin had paled considerably, and he looked like he was about to pass out.

Crap. That wasn't good.

"Listen, Luffy, you need to calm down-"

The boy's eyes shot up to meet his, and they were bloodshot, salty streams continuously falling down his cheeks. Kidd was taken aback by the pure *emotion* held there. What had he experienced that was 'worse' than losing an arm?

His fear was almost palpable.

Surprising him, Luffy reached up with his arm and started to yank at the black collar around his neck. Kidd had been briefed on what its purpose was and leapt to feet.

"Oi, if you do that-"

He was too late.

The collar beeped loudly, and the boy's body jolted. Almost immediately, Luffy groaned, eyes rolling back in his head. Kidd cursed and rushed forward, managing to catch him before he crushed the coffee table.

---

Law waited patiently until Ace left Marco's room to approach, knowing that what he intended to discuss with the other was not for his ears.

The elder vampire knew he was there, of course, and let him immediately.

"What is it, yoi? You seem...unnerved." Marco asked, motioning for him to take a seat on a cushion across from him.

"Luffy-ya injured himself while on his walk today." Law explained, "It wasn't bad, but Doma brought him to me so I could bandage it."

The other nodded, lighting his kiseru in preparation for a smoke.

"I saw...but I don't think that's what has you on edge, yoi."

"Yeah...I'm here because while treating Luffy-ya, something appeared on his skin."

Marco took a drag and puffed out smoke to his right before turning back to Law with a foreboding frown.

"Describe it."

"Hard, black, small...almost like a shell that was protecting the skin underneath." He held up his broken nail, "I couldn't pierce it."

"Is it still there?"

"No. It disappeared shortly after I noticed it."

Marco's frown deepened and he tapped his kiseru on a nearby ash tray. They sat in silence for a few moments, the other obviously thinking through everything Law had described.

"That IS concerning...perhaps the recent incident has caused his ability to manifest early, yoi."

"Do you know what it is?" Law asked, unfamiliar with this particular power. Marco closed his eyes.

"I have an idea, yes, and hopefully we will never see it in its completeness. You are aware that Katakuri is coming to moderate Kidd's discussion?" Law nodded, "I think we should consider taking him up on his offer to seal the boy."

"Are you sure? That will be difficult to hide from the purebloods."

"It has become necessary, yoi."

Law inclined his head again, this time out of respect for Marco's decision. Yes, it would be better for Luffy to seal away his abilities before he became truly dangerous. That way, he could live out his life peacefully and under the council's radar.

Just as he was about to suggest they brew some tea, Law's tablet shrieked, *loudly*. He immediately grabbed it to see what was going on and his eyes widened.

"What is it?"

"Luffy-ya's heart rate and vitals are..." His eyes scanned down the various numbers, many reaching much too high, "I think he may be having another panic attack; I need to-"

Suddenly, another alarm went off, this one new.

Law leapt to his feet, followed closely by Marco.

The emergency signal on Luffy's new collar had just been activated.

They rushed out of the room, following the GPS to where the human was located. If the signal had been sent, that meant Luffy was unconscious.

"Oi, its coming from Eustass-ya's room!" Law hissed to Marco as they barreled over surprised vampires. The elder vampire scowled and picked up the pace.

When they reached their Lord's chambers, they rushed inside and were met with a foreboding sight. Kidd held an unconscious and sickly looking Luffy in his arms and was leaning over him, *sniffing his neck*.

"Eustass-ya, NO!" Law exclaimed, startling the red-head. He relaxed when he saw who it was and adjusted himself, so he wasn't smothering the boy.

But he didn't release him. If anything, he held him closer.

"Figured you guys would show up."

"What have you done, yoi?" Marco said firmly, eyes moving from Kidd down to Luffy.

"I didn't *do* anything, Phoenix." The pureblood insisted, "The kid freaked out and, before you ask, no, I didn't drink from him. I was just curious how his blood smelled, that's all."

Law rushed forward and snatched Luffy out of the other's grip, seating himself on the opposing couch so he could assess his condition. The boy's forehead was drenched in sweat

and he confirmed that the collar did in fact activate, leaving a tiny trail of blood down his neck from the needle puncture.

"You frightened the boy somehow." Marco muttered, probing, "What did you say to him, yoi?"

"I just wanted to know why he wasn't withdrawing or whatever after losing his arm. Thought it was a little suspicious that he's been so calm, cooperative, and *accepting*, ya know?" Kidd huffed and leaned on the arm of the chair, "Didn't expect him to panic and put himself out..."

"Luffy-ya activated the collar himself?" Law questioned, earning a nod from Kidd. Why would he do that?

"Yeah, I think I might've said something that set him off." The pureblood admitted, "Asked him why he's been acting the way he has, and the kid said, 'he's survived worse'."

Law hummed, wiping perspiration from the limp human's brow. They knew for a fact that Luffy's parents were dead, killed by a vampire, and the boy was claustrophobic, which had to stem from something.

Whatever he'd survived, losing an arm was apparently less terrifying, to some extent.

"Oh, Luffy-ya...you poor thing."

"Get him back to his room, yoi." Marco put in, voice leaving no room for negotiation, "He needs to sleep off the sedative."

Law nodded and collected Luffy, so he was reclined comfortably against his chest. A group had gathered at the door (no doubt summoned by the emergency signal) that gazed down at the unconscious human with varying emotions. As he waded through the crowd, a few vampires gasped softly, surprised by the kid's pallid appearance.

When he woke, Law would make sure to discover what caused his newest panic attack, so it wouldn't happen again.

---

Once the crowd had been dispersed, Marco remained, fixing Kidd with a calculating stare. He considered the other vampires' reactions to the boy's state.

If anything, their overreaction and possessiveness proved his theory that they were all in on something he was not. The Phoenix was protecting the human, likely because of his blood. Kidd had been surprised that Luffy's blood didn't have a scent, despite knowing it was 'special'.

He'd been tempted to taste some (for research) but didn't want to break a cardinal rule of the citadel just to sate his own curiosity.

"I have to ask that you use more restraint when interacting with the humans of our citadel, yoi." Marco chided, in a surprisingly respectful tone, "Luffy in particular is a very *special* human and we don't want to create more stress for him, if we can help it."

"Yeah, my bad." He replied, smiling sheepishly as he scratched his head, "Damn, Sabo's gonna be pissed...he's close to the human, right?"

Behind his casual exterior, Kidd's thoughts were racing as he considered everything he'd learned and factored in what had just happened. After Ace's little flare up and the revelation that the human was his sibling, it was clear something was up.

Now that he'd witnessed firsthand how protective Marco was of them and met Luffy himself, Kidd was almost positive they were both 'D's. The pureblood imagined that the other citadel vampires had been acting strange lately due to the fact that he and Sabo were getting close to the truth.

What would they do if he just outright asked them about it?

With other Lords arriving soon, he'd rather not have to deal with internal conflict. *He* was the Lord now, not Marco. But that didn't mean he wasn't wary of the elder vampire.

Marco had what he didn't: the support and loyalty of nearly the entire vampire population.

Still, Kidd was getting tired of beating around the bush and tiptoeing around his own citadel.

"Yes, he is, yoi." Marco replied, "One of many."

"I'll admit, he's pretty cute." Kidd said, standing up, stretching out his back, and preparing himself the worst. It was now or never. "It's a shame both Ace and Luffy will forever be hunted by the council just for existing...being *D's* and all."

Marco didn't so much as flinch at his statement, and just stared back at him. Kidd crossed his arms and waited, wanting to hear what the other had to say in his defense. When the other refused to speak, he sighed.

"Listen, Phoenix...believe it or not, we're on the same side here. My father told me about Whitebeard before I accepted this assignment, and it sounds like he was a great Lord, 'demon' lover or not. It's only natural that you and your people took after him."

At that, Marco's eyebrow shot up.

"'Demon', yoi? What do you...oh...y-you mean-" Kidd's mouth dropped open when the other vampire *laughed*, a sound he'd never heard from the esteemed elder before.

"What's so funny!?"

"F-Forgive me..." Marco asked, wiping his eyes, "I suppose it's only natural for youths such as yourself to think that, given how little you know about them, yoi."

Before Kidd could retort, his door burst open, and a peeved looking blonde marched inside. He recoiled when Sabo got right up in his face, eyes bordering between scarlet and his natural color.

"WHAT THE HELL, KIDD!?"

"S-Sabo-"

"I just passed Law in the hallway and he told me you caused Luffy to have a panic attack!"

"Yeah, I know, but listen-"

While Sabo scolded him for scaring the 'precious little lamb', yet another person let themselves into his room. Kidd was certain Killer was smirking at his predicament (not that he could tell with the mask he wore). He'd messaged the vampire after Luffy had collapsed, wanting his brother there for support...just in case things went sideways. Marco simply watched, making no move to try and leave.

"All right, *enough*." Kidd finally managed, putting his hands on Sabo's shoulders, "I'll make it up to the kid, okay? So just relax. Marco here was about to answer a very important question."

Sabo tilted his head in confusion and turned to Marco who was now the center of attention for all three of them.

"We have no 'demons' in this citadel, yoi." He replied, smirk appearing on his lips. Kidd scowled.

"You know what I mean! Are they D's or not!?"

"Who are we talking about here?" Sabo inserted meekly, "...just so we're on the same page."

"He wants to know if Ace and Luffy are D's," Marco clarified, still not appearing ruffled by the questioning. Kidd's eye twitched, not liking the nonchalance of the other.

"As your citadel Lord, I order you to *answer the damn question!*"

"Kidd calm down! You're being rude-"

"I'm fairly certain you know the answer to your own question." Marco interrupted, eyes becoming a swirl of scarlet, "However, I will reiterate that we have no *demons* here, yoi." Kidd's mouth dropped open when the older vampire turned to leave.

"Oi, what kind of answer was that-"

Marco turned around, blood-red eyes stopping him in his tracks.

"I cannot stop you from pursuing answers, should you desire them. But I warn you, delve too deep...and you will regret it."

Was that...a threat?

"W-Wait, Lord Phoenix!" Sabo called, catching the other at the door, "Please, forgive Kidd for his rudeness. I know this is not something he would ask lightly...we just...want to know the truth. It's painfully clear that you and the others don't fully trust us and-and..."

The blonde pureblood trailed off, letting his hand fall to his side. Marco turned slightly and huffed, fierce eyes calming.

"I know, yoi. It's just...complicated."

"Well *uncomplicate* it!" Kidd exclaimed, angry at being brushed off, "The citadel can't go on like this, Marco! The 'us vs. them' mentality needs to STOP! If you're worried about us reporting you to the council just because you're harboring a few D's, then you obviously don't know us very well!"

Marco turned completely around and closed his eyes, deep in thought. Sabo looked nervously at Kidd, and then back at the former Lord. He eyed Killer, motioning for him to get ready, just in case they'd pushed the powerful vampire over the edge.

The Phoenix groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Why must you be so..." He sighed, meeting Kidd's gaze, "You remind me *way too much* of your father, yoi."

Kidd blinked.

"Is that a compliment?"

"No, yoi. Definitely not." Marco straightened out his kimono, "Listen, for what's it's worth, I appreciate what you've said, but I've heard them before. Words are just that: *words*. It's clear that you seem confident in your own findings, so I won't deny them, but I also won't confirm them, yoi."

"What can we do to earn your trust?" Sabo asked in a quiet whisper, eyes big and pleading, "Please, Marco, Kidd is right...if we're going to prosper as a citadel, we have to trust each other."

The elder vampire sighed and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'I'm going to regret this' before grabbing the small tablet attached to Sabo's waist and typing something into it.

"If you are determined to bridge the gap between us, you must decide where you stand for yourselves." He handed the pad back to Sabo, "On the left wall of the library is a secret room where we keep Pops' personal writings. Go read through them, yoi. They will give you a taste of history I doubt you've experienced before."

Kidd stepped forward and frowned at the numbers on the screen. A password maybe?

"Thank you for giving us a chance!" Sabo chirped, grinning at Marco, who smiled thinly in return.

"What kind of information will we find there?" Kidd questioned as the other moved to exit the room. He didn't understand how reading through Whitebeard's journal would solve the problem at hand. Why couldn't he just give him a simple 'yes' or 'no'!?

"There you will see Pops' story and our history with the *Denali*."

"...the what?"

"**Deeply Essential, Neomorphic, And Lethal Individuals.**" Marco rattled off, "More commonly known as the 'Denali' or D's. Despite what everyone seems to think, they're not demons."

"Neomorphic...?" Sabo mumbled to himself, "Wait, you mean that they're-"

Marco didn't reply and closed the door behind him.

---

When Law arrived at Luffy's room, the two guards immediately let him inside, where he gently placed the human's limp body on the bed. He wasted no time and removed the collar so he could get a good look at the puncture wound.

While the mark wasn't large, it looked like Luffy had caused it to move when he shook it, creating a bruise around where the needle was inserted.

It frustrated him that he'd intended the collar for the boy's protection, but it had been turned into something Luffy utilized to hurt himself.

'This may not be the best tool for the job...' Law mused as he cleaned the wound, 'Not if it causes more harm than good.' Not long after he finished bandaging Luffy's neck, there was a commotion at the door.

"You are not permitted to-"

"Let me in, damn it! I know something happened to him!"

Law sighed, recognizing Ace's voice. Of course the vampire would want to check on his little brother after such an obnoxious alarm went off, alerting everyone to Luffy's plight.

"It's fine!" He called, silencing the guards, "He may enter."

Ace was at Luffy's bedside in seconds.

"What happened?"

"It appears that Eustass-ya said something that greatly upset Luffy-ya." Law explained, motioning with his head to the discarded collar on the nearby table, "...he utilized our tech to put himself under, likely as a way to escape the situation."

Ace's eyes widened and he leaned down to grab Luffy's hand, sorrow clear on his face.

"He's been through so much...and we only seem to make things worse."

Law hummed, feeling conflicted. It was his job to ensure that Luffy remained healthy and secure, but their measures so far had only *damaged* the boy's mental health. Normally, he



wouldn't particularly care. As a human, Luffy only needed to remain physically able to give blood.

'But he's different. We can't treat him like a normal human.'

"We need to give him more freedom, Law." Ace whispered, pressing his forehead to Luffy's hand, "It's what he desires most."

"That would be...risky." He replied, trying to think practically, "Remember how valuable he is, Ace-ya. He could-"

"What? Escape again?" Ace scoffed, "With how much we've upped security, I seriously doubt it, and Lu's not exactly capable of fighting his way out."

Law wasn't so sure about that.

"I will consider it." Law said, standing up. He agreed that something needed to change in their treatment of Luffy. The more shackles they added, the worse things seemed to get. "If you'd like, you may remain with him until he wakes. Luffy-ya will surely appreciate the company."

Ace nodded, not even bothering to turn and look at him. All of his attention was on his pale and unconscious brother.

Law informed the guards outside Luffy's room to keep a close eye on the brothers before rushing back through the citadel in an attempt to locate Marco. Kidd had seemed like he wanted to speak to them, and Law hoped his old friend hadn't done anything foolish.

---

Marco felt like an idiot.

'What was I thinking!?' He grimaced, sharp nails digging into the skin of his palm, 'We swore that we would never-'

Groaning, Marco reached up and ruffled his hair, sitting down on his bed. He'd essentially confirmed that Ace and Luffy were D's AND gave the purebloods access to his sire's collection.

Sabo was too damn charming for his own good.

"Marco-ya?" Law asked as he entered his room, eyes narrowed in concern, "What is it?"

"..."

"Talk to me." The other insisted, moving to stand in front of his hunched form.

Marco explained to the younger vampire what happened after he left Kidd's room, and Law's posture stiffened.

"I see...but why send them to read through Master Whitebeard's writings? If they have already discovered our existence-"

"They seemed *sincere*, yoi." He interrupted, "And against my better judgment, I decided to give them a chance to prove themselves trustworthy. If anything will bring out their true nature, knowing the secret history certainly will."

"...and if they turn on us?"

"We outnumber them, yoi." Marco stated while cracking the joints in his hand, "If we have to, we will protect our own."

---

Sabo led Kidd and Killer down into the library, a determined look on his face. Lord Phoenix was giving them a chance to create trust between them, and they needed to make the most of the opportunity. Whatever Marco wanted them to know would hopefully help them understand his point of view and unite the vampires of the Moby Dick.

"I can't believe it..." Kidd muttered to himself, "'D' *doesn't* stand for 'demon'? How the hell was I supposed to know!?"

He could understand his frustration. With every new thing they learned in Whitebeard's citadel, the more their education and apparent knowledge fell short.

"You should apologize to the little human." Killer replied, earning a eye twitch from their fiery Lord, "I seriously doubt he appreciated being called a demon."

"I agree." Sabo put in, flipping on some lights in the massive, underground chamber. No matter how many times he came here, the sheer size of the room always amazed him, "Luffy didn't deserve that and it was incredibly insensitive to his situation."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Like I said, I'll make it up to him."

Sabo sighed, knowing they weren't going to get a better response from Kidd. He wasn't exactly known for his compassion. After a few minutes of searching along the left wall, they came across a portion that stuck out slightly. When he pushed lightly on a section just below his shoulder, a keypad emerged.

"...are you certain we should do this?" Killer asked, stopping Sabo from touching the lock, "The way Lord Phoenix was acting, the information held in this room could turn the council against us."

"It's also the key to creating peaceful relations with the Whitebeards." Sabo replied, turning to face them, "I don't know about you two, but its becoming clear the council has been hiding things from the people, and I want to know the truth." Kidd nodded, lips tight in a thin line.

"Yeah...I want to know about the D's...the 'Denali', or whatever they're called. We're doing this, Killer."

"Very well. If that's what you want."

With them all in agreement, Sabo moved to type in the password that would give them access to the secret room. In some ways, he was grateful Kidd's patience had fallen short and he'd questioned Marco about the D's. The internal tension had worsened after Luffy's retrieval and it was time they resolved it. But still, it was strange to think his adorable little human had such powerful blood in his veins...

Ace, he could believe, but Luffy was just so...small.

'I imagine we'll learn more once we're inside.' Sabo mused as the door slid open, responding to the correct code. He had his own theories about the D's simply based on the acronym itself: **Deeply Essential, Neomorphic, And Lethal Individuals**. 'Neomorphic alludes that their genes were altered or mutated...but was it a natural process or done purposefully?'

Whatever they were, they weren't normal humans.

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! So, this chapter might just be one of the most important ones in the entire story. We're going to be learning a lot about the D's, history, and Luffy's past. My original plan was to fit it all into one chapter but...yeah...I'm definitely going to be splitting it into two. Consider this chapter 'Part 1' and the next one 'Part 2'. We are also going to be jumping between Sabo (and his gang in the secret room) and Luffy (shifting POV's). There's going to be a lot of information (and real history mentions) so let me know if you have any questions. Anyway, enough of my rambling, ON TO THE CHAPTER!

Sabo hadn't known what to expect of the 'secret room' but it was certainly just as organized as he'd imagined. Though relatively small in size, the walls were lined with books, recordings, and maps, some in good condition...some falling apart at the seams. The air was chilly, no doubt an attempt to keep the ancient materials preserved.

"Where do we even start?" Kidd asked, breaking the silence. Beside him, Killer looked around, likely contemplating the same question. Sabo hummed, scanning the shelves for any sort of organizational system they could use to narrow their search.

As he walked further into the room, he was drawn towards the only piece of furniture in the room: an old desk. It was fairly large, indicating its user was tall. Sabo ran a hand over the intricate designs carved into it, amazed something so obviously old had survived for so long.

Curious to see if it held any secrets, Sabo opened the main drawer (with a bit of difficulty), revealing a book. It was covered in a preservative film but looked to be just what they were looking for...if the name on the front was any indication.

*Edward Newgate.*

"Over here." Sabo called, summoning Kidd and Killer to his side. He gently placed the thick book on the desk so he could open it, doing his best to be as delicate with the pages as possible. Even with the film protecting it, he was concerned one jolt would tear the archaic journal apart.

The first thing they saw was written on the inside of the cover in neat print:

*Property of Edward Newgate, a Personal Journal.*

"Well...shall we?" He questioned in a quiet voice, earning a nod from his companions. It was time they learned what the council so desperately wanted to hide.

---

---

Luffy woke slowly, his body taking a while to catch up to his brain. A few minutes later, he groaned, head pounding as his vision cleared. Recognizing the room, he determined that someone had returned him to his room after...what happened.

"Luffy, you're awake!" A voice chirped while something squeezed his remaining hand. He turned his head slightly and was met with the familiar face of Ace, a tired smile appearing on his lips. "Thank God...I was so worried."

The boy swallowed to wet his dry throat and instinctively tightened his grip on his brother's hand as recollection of his attack returned to him. The pureblood Lord, Kidd apparently, had said things to him that brought back memories of his time as a prisoner.

"C-Could you help me sit up?" Luffy asked, prompting a swift nod from Ace. The vampire supported him as he moved so his body was comfortably leaning against the headboard. A quick glance towards the barred door revealed the eyes of one of his guards who was looking in at him. The vampire then lifted a hand to his ear, definitely letting Torao know that he was awake.

"How's your neck?"

Luffy gently untangled his hand from Ace's so he could touch the bandages that had been applied there.

"It just...aches a little."

The vampire hummed, sadness clear in his eyes.

"Lu...Law told me what happened...that you hurt yourself." The boy flinched at the reminder, gaze lowering in shame, "I know you probably don't want to talk about it, but please...will you help me understand so I can make sure it never happens again?"

Luffy considered Ace's words. His brother was worried about him...and was being sincere (somehow, he just knew).

'I've never told anyone about what happened back then.' He thought, clenching his left fist around the soft blanket that covered him. It was *painful* to even think about. 'But maybe it'll do me some good to talk to someone about it...'

He didn't want to keep having attacks.

He wanted to overcome his fear.

Inhaling deeply, Luffy replied with an almost inaudible,

"...okay."

***The day has finally come for me to set off on my own. Though my mentors mean well, I have long since learned how to feed and hunt. The nobility still scorn my existence, but that is of no consequence. Pureblood or turned, it doesn't matter. We all live together on this Earth and I intend to achieve my dream...***

The first entry in the journal was dated '1750' which took Sabo aback. To think Whitebeard had been alive back then...there weren't many vampires still active that had been born during that time (of the purebloods, anyway).

"What's this 'dream' he mentions?" Kidd put in, leaning over the journal with a frown.

"I don't know...give me some space so we can keep going."

#### ***November – 1750***

***Humans are an intriguing species...very loyal. Though they often fight over petty things. I hope to welcome some into my family soon. - says they are stupid creatures, but I disagree. Thanks to their vitality, our own race has survived for this long.***

Sabo scanned the next few pages, intrigued by the history displayed on them. Back then the humans were completely unaware of the existence of vampires and it was strictly forbidden to reveal yourself to one. Feedings were done stealthily and always ended with the human pleasantly confused (or unconscious) so they wouldn't understand what happened to them.

#### ***January – 1850***

***My dream is coming along wonderfully! There are so many outcasts in this world...and now they have a place to call home. My family grows every day and I couldn't be happier! However, there are rumors of killings occurring all over the world, definitely done by vampires. Why have they become so greedy and violent?***

***The nobles all assume the turned and vice versa. Well, whoever they are, they risk overturning the peace and secrecy we have worked so hard to achieve.***

"He dreamed...of having a family." Killer said, interpreting the words on the page. Kidd snorted.

"Okay, not what I expected."

Sabo, for his part, focused his attention on the killings mentioned. Somehow, he knew that would be an important aspect of the story.

#### ***March – 1852***

***It is getting out of hand. So many humans are dying for what? Amusement? Don't they realize they are culling the only species that allows for our survival? The elders have called a meeting (to which I have been invited, thanks to my influence) to discuss a solution.***

#### ***April – 1852***

***To think, we have taken so long to realize that our power requires checks and balances. It has been decided that there needs to be something to keep us accountable, and I agree. The old laws simply aren't good enough and need to be updated for the humans' safety. I am told that Dr. Vega- may have a solution.***

"Hey, why are some of these names blurred?" Kidd complained, squinting in an attempt to understand the word.

"Perhaps the pages have thinned."

"...looks intentional to me."

Sabo ignored his companions' conversation and focused on trying to understand the culture of the time. He'd never heard of any meeting or 'checks and balances' before. The council was always very adamant that vampires shouldn't need to control themselves because they, quite literally, owned the world.

***September – 1852***

***Dr. Vega- has brought us his solution, after taking the summer to 'prepare' it, and I must say, it is ingenious. What better way to protect the humans than to have them protect themselves? Some of the elders are still skeptical, but I believe the vote will be in favor of the doctor's creation.***

***These...altered humans.***

---

"It...happened when I was seven years old." Luffy began, bottom lip trembling. Ace noticed immediately and scooted closer so he could rub a soothing thumb over the back of his hand. "Mom and Dad were outside doing their daily chores and I was inside, playing."

He swallowed hard, preparing himself.

It was not an easy story to tell.

---

*Seven-year old Luffy giggled softly to himself as he made his teddy bear 'walk'. It was his favorite toy, one his mom made for him when he turned five. Today was a day just like any other...hot and dusty, but Luffy found that he didn't mind it so much. As long as Mom and Dad were with him, it was home.*

*Thinking of his parents made him reach up to touch the red pendant that hung around his neck. His Dad had explained what it was for in that voice he only ever used when he was being serious.*

*'Will I really get superpowers when I'm older?' The little boy thought with a tilt of his head. It sounded really cool, but his Dad hadn't seemed too thrilled with the idea. Then again, Mom said that they both had powers, but he'd never seen them before.*

*With a shrug, Luffy focused back on his teddy bear. He'd probably understand it more when he was older.*

*Suddenly, he heard some weird noises coming from outside. Curious, Luffy stood to his feet and padded towards their front door, pulling his bear along by its arm. As he got closer, the noises became a bit clearer.*

*It sounded like his parents and...an animal? Were they being attacked by wolves again?*

*The little boy trotted over to the window and peeked up, only to freeze, eyes widening in horror. His Dad appeared to be injured and was holding his arm tightly, blood flowing from a deep cut on his upper shoulder. Though it was scary enough to see his strong Dad hurt, the thing that had definitely caused the injury stood a few feet away, claws dripping red.*

*"Rogue, go!" Dragon hissed from where he stood in front of her.*

*"No, I won't leave you!"*

*"Think of, Luffy! Go!"*

*With that, his mother rushed towards the door, prompting the monster (a vampire, Luffy recognized) to pounce. He tore his fearful gaze away from the window when his Mom rushed inside and latched the door.*

*"M-Mom...what's going on? Why's Dad-"*

*"Come here, darling!" Rogue ordered, scooping him up into her arms and causing him to drop his teddy bear. Luffy physically trembled as the noise outside increased in volume. Was Dad going to be okay?*

*His Mom rushed through the house until she came to their bedroom, a room they all shared together in the back of their small dwelling. Luffy yelped as she moved him to her hip and yanked on one of floor planks up, kicking aside the rug that hid it.*

*"Listen to me, Lu." The woman managed, voice breaking as she lowered him into the small space carved out in the ground, "I need you to stay here and be very quiet. Can you do that for me, baby?"*

*"But why..." Luffy whimpered, tears falling down his round cheeks, "Mom I'm scared-"*

*"I know, I know." Rogue soothed, reaching down to caress his cheek. She flinched when a loud banging sound echoed through their house. "Oh baby...your father and I love you so much. You know that right?"*

*Luffy nodded, sniffling.*

*His Mom smiled sweetly at him before closing the plank over his head, leaving him in darkness. He heard her rush out of the room just as yet another crash shook the foundation, causing some dust to fall onto Luffy's head.*



*The little boy did his best to stay quiet, just like Mom said, but it was so hard when all he could do was listen to screams and snarls, their home shaking violently. Eventually, everything went silent.*

*Luffy wiped his eyes and looked up when the sound of heavy footsteps entered the bedroom. Much heavier than his Mom's. Honestly terrified, he covered his mouth in an attempt to mask his breathing, just like Dad taught him.*

*He jolted when whatever was above him pushed furniture around, snarling in frustration. After a few minutes of searching (and destroying stuff), the monster stepped directly on the plank above Luffy's head, causing it to creak and bend slightly.*

*The boy inhaled in fright, not daring to move.*

*When the foot was removed from the plank, Luffy relaxed only to be blinded by light seconds later when the wood was torn away, revealing the smirking face of a vampire, blood dripping from his fangs.*

*"There you are....my little blood bag."*

---

## ***January – 1865***

***It's been years since Dr. Vega- introduced his DENALI and the generations are being created very quickly. The science behind it is beyond me but from what I understand, he is somehow able to speed up production of younglings so that they reach adulthood much faster than normal humans. The good doctor claims that it will no longer be necessary once a decent sized fighting force has been collected.***

"Okay...I'm lost." Kidd admitted, retreating from the table to run a hand through his hair, "So the D's were never human at all? Just...artificial?"

"Hmmm...give me a moment." Sabo replied, leaving the journal to scan the shelves. Surely there was something in this room that could give them specific information about the D's.

He was pleased to find that the collection was alphabetized so it was easy to go straight to the section he wanted. Sabo ran his right hand along the spines, searching for one that would answer their questions. Just as he was about to give up and move to a different section, a title caught his eye.

*The Creation of the Human Race's Guardian Angels.*

Sabo wasted no time in grabbing the book, dusting off the cover, and flipping through its fragile pages.

"Did you find something?" Killer asked, leaning over his shoulder. He nodded.

"Yes...I believe I did. Look at this!" Sabo continued, pointing to the pictorial spread at the beginning of the book. It appeared to be a family tree of the D's. Each 'tribe' (as they were

called) started in the branches and worked their way down to the roots. There were twelve in total, some ending long before others. "There were so many..."

"Yeah and check out the last date." Kidd put in, pointing at the bottom of the page, "2085."

Sabo swallowed hard, knowing from history what happened that year.

*The Fall.*

The year the Earth was razed to the ground, killing most of its inhabitants.

Knowing he'd chosen the right material, Sabo turned the page delicately to see exactly what information the ancient book held.

### **Who are the DENALI?**

**They are Deeply Essential, Neomorphic, And Lethal Individuals whose creation was endorsed by the vampire Elders in the 19th century. After the murders that took place across the globe (motivation and cause unknown), it was decided that our actions and feedings needed to be policed by beings other than ourselves.**

**Otherwise, we risked the lives of humans, our only food source.**

**Circa 1850, a vampire doctor whose knowledge was said to be at least 500 years ahead of his time, introduced a revolutionary idea: what if humans were given means to protect themselves?**

**After much deliberation, it was agreed that the experiments would proceed, and within a few decades, the Denali, or D tribes were born.**

**Though the originals were nurtured in a laboratory setting, D's are in fact, fully human. Their DNA was altered with that of our own to give them abilities far beyond that of a normal human. The first few generations' growth was quickened by their creator so that we would not have to wait centuries for their full development.**

**We educated them on their purpose and eventually they separated from us, no longer requiring our labs to reproduce. True to the doctor's promise, the D's were strong and capable of protecting their fellow humans.**

**Their blood is completely inedible, making them almost like an entirely new race. The only issue the Elders found with the doctor's work was that it was difficult to predict the abilities the D's would develop.**

**Some feared they would become too powerful and overthrow us. But, to the humans, they were guardian angels.**

**Unseen protectors keeping them safe from the world of vampires.**

"Fascinating..." Sabo muttered, "*We* created the D's to protect the humans from...well...us. They are genetically altered beings designed to combat our superior strength."

"That is certainly different from what we learned in school," Kidd replied, frown deepening, "and brings up another question...how did we end up fighting a war against them?"

"I'm not sure," He admitted, turning back to the still open journal on the desk, "but I bet we can find out."

---

"T-Then...well..." Luffy continued in a weak voice, squeezing Ace's hand so hard it was probably going to bruise (but Ace didn't mind, he wanted the boy to know that he was there for him), "He grabbed me and carried me through the house kicking and s-screaming...r-r-right past Mom and then D-Dad's-"

The kid couldn't bring himself to say it which made Ace's heart break and anger *soar*. What kind of sick bastard murdered a child's parents and then paraded him out to see their mutilated bodies!?

"Where did he take you?" Ace asked when Luffy stopped talking. The boy sniffled and bit the inside of his cheek.

"Underground. I-I think I passed out on the way there cause I don't remember exactly how or when I arrived...but...I woke up in a c-cage."

---

*Luffy woke with a pounding headache and little to not space to move. Heart pounding in his chest, the boy grabbed the bars surrounding him and shook them, unsure how he got there. Upon further inspection, he discovered his body had been shoved into a tiny cage.*

*The barred metal box was barely big enough for him and forced him to sit in an uncomfortable position.*

*'W-Where am I?' Luffy thought with a tremble, looking down at the room below. His new prison sat upon a shelf molded out of the walls of the cave(?), one of two, with the other directly across from his. There were all sorts of strange gadgets strewn about, making the scary place look very messy and disorganized. The only sources of light in the room were two dusty light bulbs that hung from the mud ceiling.*

*Looking to his right, Luffy noted a wooden door, that hopefully led outside.*

*As he was examining the door, it opened, causing him to yelp in fright. The large vampire that kidnapped him entered and didn't even look up at him, just started messing with some weird stuff on the table. Luffy swallowed hard, wetting his dry throat. This was the monster that... that...*

*"L-Let me go!" He yelled, mustering up the courage to shake the cage. His voice broke as he shouted, revealing the terror that continued to build up inside him. What did this monster want with him? He'd called him a 'blood bag'-*

*Luffy whimpered when the vampire snarled up at him, crazed eyes meeting his. Though he said nothing, it was clear that he wanted him to be quiet.*

*"Y-You...you killed Mom and D-Dad..." He sobbed, tears forming in his eyes as he remembered the vacant gazes of his parents, "...why would you d-do that...I-I HATE YOU!"*

*At his outburst, the vampire slammed his fist down on the table.*

*"Blood bags don't talk."*

*"I'm not a bag!" Luffy shot back, barely able to see through his tears, "Let me out! I don't want to be here!"*

*The monster apparently disliked his noise and abandoned his work at the table to stalk over to the shelf Luffy's cage was set on. He reached up and slide a key into the padlock, causing the door to swing open.*

*Before Luffy could celebrate his freedom and make a run for it, the vampire grabbed him by his right foot and carried him upside down out through the wooden door. He struggled, thrashed, and screamed, to no avail. Nothing he did even made the beast flinch.*

*The next room over was much larger and had a small hole the roof where bits of sand found their way inside. Luffy cried out in pain as he was thrown onto a table, breaking some glass bottles that were in his path.*

*"Kids...always so noisy." His captor hissed to himself as he cracked his neck ominously. Luffy attempted to crawl away but was stopped by a grimy hand on his neck, pinning his squirming body to the splintering table. "Listen closely, brat, the only reason you're here and not dead like your idiotic parents is that I need your blood. If you want to stay alive, you will do exactly as I say, and be whatever I say you are. Here, in my house, you are my property."*

*"N-No..." Luffy managed, clawing at the large hand against his throat. The vampire smirked, eyes bloodshot and red as he pulled him closer to his mouth.*

*"Be a good little slave and maybe you'll live long enough to see me accomplish my goal." He then readjusted his grip so Luffy was held in his arms and his neck was exposed.*

*Luffy screamed when the monster's fangs sunk into his neck. It felt like two red-hot needles piercing his skin, burning everything as they drained his life force. To make things worse, his captor bit him multiple times, forcing him to feel the pain over and over again.*

*And then, just as he was on the brink of unconsciousness, the monster laughed, searing that mocking, sadistic voice into his head.*

---

*"...how long were you his prisoner?" Ace asked, prompting a shaky exhale from his traumatized little brother.*

*"It's...h-hard to say...maybe a few months?" Luffy replied, skin pallid and sweating, "After the first week, my thoughts started to blur together and g-get...fuzzy."*

*'Probably the blood loss.' The freckled vampire hypothesized, once again cursing the bastard who'd done such horrendous and forbidden things to his baby brother.*

"I remember he'd drink from me once every few days...sometimes more." Luffy continued, "I-I think he was using my blood to heal himself, or something. He had lots of scars and wounds that oozed constantly."

'Odd...for a vampire to not be able to heal naturally.' Ace mused with a frown, 'Who was this guy?' He'd first assumed a feral, but ferals weren't capable of planning and couldn't form intelligent words.

"Did you ever learn his name?"

Luffy shook his head.

"Did he..." Ace took a breath, knowing this question would probably bring back even more bad memories, "...give you that scar on your chest?"

The boy bit his lip and nodded.

"H-He came back one day from wherever he usually went, really pissed off. I don't know, maybe I s-said something that set him off...but he..." Luffy curled in over his knees, "he heated up a knife and-and-"

"It's okay, Lu, you don't have to say it." The vampire interrupted, hating how small and fragile Luffy looked. Maybe it was time to bring this conversation to a close...Ace didn't want to force his brother to relive the events of the past. "How did you escape?"

The boy wiped his eyes and uncurled slightly.

"I was rescued."

---

### ***June – 1910***

***My family and I have settled into our new home. Thanks to our hard work, we have finally secured a permanent homestead with a view of the Atlantic Ocean. I make sure that my sons and daughters dutifully follow the new rules set by the Elders so that we can continue friendly relations with the Denali.***

***However, some of them are little troublemakers...like Marco, the cheeky little brat. He tries to fight with that D brat, Trafalgar, more often than I'd prefer.***

"T-Trafalgar!?" Kidd spluttered, "As in *Trafalgar Law*!? The doctor is a D too?"

"I suppose it makes sense, in hindsight." Killer said while putting a calming hand on Kidd's shoulder, "They seem very close."

"And now he's a vampire..." Sabo muttered, bringing a hand up to his chin. If their blood was poisonous, how was that possible? He could apply that question to Ace's situation as well.

### ***August – 1914***

*Though the humans have warred amongst themselves throughout history, this new escalation looks like it's going to be one of the bloodiest. We hope to stay out of the conflict but I cannot help but feel like there must be something we can do...*

*September – 1914*

*Marco has decided to join the so called "Allied Powers", undercover of course. He is young, turned less than a decade ago, so he still feels the need to fight for his old people. I will not stop him, if that is what he wants. Hopefully, this war will end soon and bring Marco back to me.*

Sabo pulled out a picture stuck between the pages and quietly held it out for the other two to see. It was an old black-and-white photo of Marco in a soldier's uniform that had a white cross sown onto the arm. The vampire hadn't aged a day.

From there, they skipped ahead a little bit, wanting to get to the parts that concerned the vampires, the Denali, and the future. However, it was incredibly interesting to learn of the development of Whitebeard's estate, Marco's participation in both World Wars as a decorated combat medic, etc.

Apparently, when he was still newly turned, he had a love for humans that dulled over time. It was strange to think that he was once *human* himself.

Sabo stopped flipping when they reached a 1962.

*October – 1962*

*My family, the Elders, and other clans are concerned this 'stand-off' will result in the worst possible outcome: nuclear war. The humans have come far with their technology, as seen in 1945. Should things escalate further...the Elders have decreed that we will intervene, if only to keep the humans from killing themselves.*

*The Denali have warned us to stay away, that intervening in major human affairs is a breach of our treaty. Hopefully, things will diffuse peacefully.*

*December – 1965*

*As humanity turns to space, we keep our attention on the ground. After the 'Cuban Missile Crisis' a few years back, relations have only soured between us and the Denali. They intend to protect the humans from us by any means necessary and we worry that the humans may one day destroy themselves through their desire for 'peace'.*

*February – 1966*

*The unthinkable has happened. A group of vampires clashed violently with some D's in a small island village, resulting in the destruction of the settlement and multiple casualties. Eye-witnesses claim the vampires acted like 'rabid animals', which is very concerning and reminiscent of the murders that occurred back in the 50s.*

***Myself, the Elders, and other high ranking vampires tried to reach out to the Denali leadership, but they lost many soldiers and claim it was an ambush...I fear this may spark a conflict that will not end anytime soon.***

"That doesn't sound good."

"No, it doesn't." Sabo replied, bringing a clawed hand up to his chin. The murders Whitebeard continued to mention stuck out in his mind. They sounded almost like vampires gone feral, which could happen in a few different ways:

First, a turning gone wrong. If done incorrectly, the human could effectively lose its mind and succumb to their more primal instincts.

The second usually involved blood poisoning and is a much less permanent issue. If a vampire drank from something (human or animal) that had soured, they could temporarily lose their grip on reality, but the victim returns to their senses eventually.

Sabo didn't think there was any other way to become a feral, but he supposed at this point, anything was possible. Who knows what else the Council was hiding from them...

***October – 1966***

***Very sadly, the Denali have declared war. This occurred after an investigation that concluded we were at fault for the massacre and that our men were in that village, quite literally, killing everyone in their path and preparing to ambush the D patrol. I am sickened at the thought of vampires killing human children for sport, but that is apparently what occurred.***

***We were able to capture one of the vampires in question but every attempt at interrogation has failed. Dr. Vega- is unsure of the cause of their 'madness' but was able to link the accused to a sect that has been vying for power for years.***

***Personally, I fear this corruption is more ingrained than we think.***

---

*In the days after his kidnapping, Luffy found himself withdrawing into his mind, too terrified of what waited for him in wakefulness. He'd fought hard at first, but all too soon, it became too much.*

*The constant hunger.*

*The pain.*

*The exhaustion.*

*The walls of his tiny cage closing in on him.*

*In a sick way, the interactions he had with his captor were the only things keeping him sane. But when he was alone, he'd think about his parents and imagine he was back home, eating delicious food (and definitely not wasting away in a hole in the ground).*

*It became routine for him to find solace in his thoughts, ignoring all the bad stuff in reality.*

*That is, until something happened that brought him back from the brink. It happened in the form of large hands gently removing him from his cage, hands he (in his blank stupor) attributed to his captor. Luffy was nestled in the arms of the monster, inwardly steeling himself for the bite that was sure to come.*

*But instead, a noise 'snapped' right in front of his face, echoing through the underground room. So startled by the unexpected sound, Luffy yelped, his breathes coming quickly as he attempted to escape the grip of the being who held him.*

*"Back with us, hmmm?" An unfamiliar voice said, making Luffy freeze. That...wasn't what the monster sounded like.*

*Looking up and focusing his gaze for the first time in many months, the boy examined the face of an unfamiliar man. He was very tall and wore a long black cloak, the lower half of his face covered by a rather fluffy looking scarf.*

*"Brother, what have you got there?"*

*"A human child." When the man's companion spoke, he revealed long fangs, making Luffy cry out in terror and thrash, doing everything he could to get away. "Easy, little one...shhh...you don't have to fear us."*

*Luffy whimpered, not comforted at all by the vampire's words. For all he knew, these guys worked for the monster-man.*

*He'd learned long ago not to get his hopes up.*

*"What are you going to do with it?" The red-haired vampire asked, eyeing Luffy with mild interest, "It looks half-dead."*

*"For now, let's take him with us. Have you found anything else of interest in this place?"*

*"No...not really, though it does look like something's been living down here."*

*Luffy tuned out the vampire's conversation at that point, trembling against his new captor's chest. They were going to take him away? Was it going to be somewhere scary? He was once again brought back to reality by a snap, making his tiny body jolt.*

*"I need you to stay awake, boy." The larger vampire chided before setting him down on a soft pillow-thing. Luffy's head swiveled, trying to understand how he'd gotten to this new, weird place.*

*It was cool and there was furniture around like they used to have at home. What happened to the bad place? Hadn't they been underground?*

*"This is the trailer I travel in." The vampire explained while kneeling before him, prompting another flinch, "My name is Katakuri, little one...don't worry, I'm not like whoever was keeping you down there."*



---

"Katakuri?" Ace questioned, thinking the name sounded vaguely familiar. Luffy nodded.

"Mhm. I guess he was passing through and decided to take me out of there." The boy shrugged. "Honestly...I don't really know why."

"What happened next?"

"He kept me with him and his group for a while...fed me, treated my wounds...saved my life." Luffy continued, some color returning to his face, "I remember being so *shocked* that he didn't want to drink from me. Well, that and it took a while to get used to being...present, again."

"Present?" Ace probed, recalling what Luffy had mentioned in his story about 'withdrawing'. The boy frowned.

"It was so disorienting for me to realize that I had just all but given up on life. I-I was broken...unable to face him head-on." The boy explained, voice shaky with emotion, "That's why I don't want to get like that *ever again*. I decided I would become a person that would keep getting up over and over, no matter what!"

Ace smiled fondly at his little brother, squeezing his hand. Luffy had been through so much...and he just kept impressing him with his spirit.

With his *strength*.

"I'm proud of you, Lu." He found himself saying, earning a surprised look, "You're so, so strong."

The kid returned his smile, a slight blush appearing on his face.

"Thanks."

"Anytime."

"No really," The boy insisted, turning so he was facing him, "thanks...for listening."

Ace flashed Luffy a grin and pulled him in for a hug, one the kid actually returned (which made him happier than he ever thought it would).

---

Sabo stared wide-eyed at the journal on the desk, shocked at what he'd just read. On either side of him, Kidd and Killer looked equally stunned.

They'd skipped ahead a bit, skimming through notations about the war with the Denali. While it was very informative to learn about the different D tribes and which ones attempted to remain neutral (or not), they wanted to see what happened closer to the Fall.

(Kidd did request they look at entries that occurred in 2020, the so-called 'cursed year', to satisfy his own curiosity. Apparently, quite a few members of Whitebeard's clan came down

with the virus that plagued the world at that time, but they thankfully didn't have any casualties, attributing it to vampire's healing traits.)

However, the closer they got to the Fall, the worse things seemed to get.

"N-No way...that's impossible!" Kidd hissed, balling up a fist, "That can't be right!"

"...we have no reason to distrust his words."

"I know that, Kil...but..."

Sabo swallowed hard, trying to process the words alongside his companions.

**March – 2080**

*Many disturbing things have come to light. First and foremost, the existence of a sect of vampires who have sworn loyalty to ways of Im, the ancient vampire Lord known as the 'Empty King'. They have worked their way up through the ranks, so that they can have power and influence.*

*They are the ones responsible for the senseless murder of humans and further agitating the D's (likely hoping to thin our ranks).*

*Thanks to research Marco has done, we've learned that followers of Im are often given a serum said to have been created from the Empty King's blood, one that gives 'strength beyond the limits of a fleshly vessel'.*

*In reality, it taps a vampire's instinctive feral nature and turns them into dark entities whose only purpose is to further the will of Im. We fear they intend to raise him from his hibernation, though none of us (and hopefully them) know the location of his resting place.*

*He was sealed away for a reason...God help us all should he be resurrected.*

*Even now, my family and I have been forced to barricade ourselves inside our home to avoid invasion. The Elders have been killed and there are very few allies left who are able to help. We have also learned their intention is to dissolve the Elder system and create what they are calling a 'Council'.*

*Should they succeed...I fear we all may suffer for it. Especially the humans.*

*Ironically, many of the Denali have offered to help us. After the massacre of the Elders, it seems they have realized we were all being used...puppets in a dark game of our enemies creation.*

*I can only hope they reach us, and our few remaining allies, in time.*

# Chapter 21

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I'm soooo sorry about the wait...I started a full-time (unpaid) internship that's really draining me dry. Thank you so much for your patience and I hope ya'll enjoy Part 2 of our look into the past!

Sabo crossed his arms and ruminated on what they'd just read. It was all very incriminating for the Council, who claimed to have been in power for much longer than they apparently were. If Whitebeard's words were truthful...their leaders had been lying to them about their origins and many other things.

'How could we not know?' He mused, gritting his teeth. First, the Denali weren't *demons* who hunted vampires, but beings created *by them* to protect their food supply. Second, the Council had apparently taken power by force to further their own agenda.

What else had they lied about?

"Okay, okay...back up." Kidd said, prompting Sabo to look up, "Have either of you even *heard* of this 'Im' person? Cause I haven't. How do we know Whitebeard wasn't just senile or something?"

"I'm inclined to believe him," Sabo answered, "but I see your point. Perhaps this is something we can ask your father about." Kidd nodded, frown never disappearing.

"We should keep reading." Killer suggested, motioning his head at the still open journal, "We have almost reached 2085...I imagine much changed after that."

Sabo huffed and inclined his head in agreement. According to their history books (and the Council), the Fall occurred because the humans and D's joined forces against them. Encouraged by the 'demons', the humans used their nuclear weapons, decimating the planet. After it was all over, the Council and remaining vampires decided that the humans were simply too stupid to keep themselves alive, ushering in the use of Citadels.

Vampires would capture humans and keep them alive so their race would no longer have to fear extinction because of the stupidity of the 'sheep'.

Needless to say, Sabo was curious to see if the stories would differ.

Silently, the three made their way back to the desk and flipped a few pages ahead until they reached the year 2085.

*April – 2085*

*It has been five years since the true conflict began and there is no end in sight. The followers of the Empty King's philosophy, who we have deemed 'Rouges', have continued to gather their forces and attack any who oppose them. In particular, they focused their attack on the Denali, thinning their ranks to almost zero.*

*To my knowledge, some tribes have already been completely wiped out.*

*To make matters worse, due to the Rouges' recent activities, the humans have discovered our existence. We tried to placate them with the aid of the remaining D's, but the poor things are just as frightened of them as they are of us.*

*Their governments are scrambling as they decide what to do while fending off attacks from the Rouges...who seem to enjoy torturing them. Surely they understand that without humans, we all die?*

*I fear this will end very badly...should things get worse, I intend to take my family underground. I refuse to lose them in this fight that never should've happened.*

Sabo and his companions said nothing to each other as they flipped the page yet again, bodies tense with anticipation.

*June – 2085*

*I have no words to express my sorrow. So many of my children have died.*

*The humans' weapons are devastating and we cannot leave the bunker. I know our home is gone above us and can only hope others survive this devastation.*

*July – 2085*

*Today, we have finally managed to open communication with some of our allies who have apprised us of the current situation of the world. The Rouges provoked the conflict with the humans, painting our race as an evil that must be purged. Many of us suspect some of the weapons were fired by them in their insane desire for destruction.*

*We can only assume they wanted to 'reset the world' or some other madness...perhaps to make it easier to locate their long-missing King.*

*The radiation has permeated the air above us, killing the land and everything around it that wasn't destroyed in the blasts. From what I'm told, even the oceans have dried up as a direct result of our destroyed atmosphere.*

*Thankfully, Dr. Vega- has hidden away tools for such an occasion. He has already started the long process of cleansing certain areas, at least to the point of being survivable. The rest will be up to us.*

*Once we return to the surface, we will need to locate some humans or we will die. Our stores will only last so long. I am saddened that the humans resorted to violence so quickly, despite the fact that they were antagonized. Their panic and lack of reasoning has led to so many deaths and the loss of our planet as it once was.*

### *Perhaps I misjudged them?*

"...that's..." Kidd whispered, lip curling up into a snarl, "...*not* what we were taught."

"Indeed." Sabo echoed, "It seems that the Council helped end the world, but why?" In the journal, Whitebeard theorized it was either due to their feral nature or an attempt to 'flatten' the land to make their search for the Empty King easier...but was that really true?

"Perhaps as a way to gain control?" Killer suggested, "The Fall almost killed all the humans but it also thinned out the vampires. Blowing the planet to hell is a good way to disguise getting rid of someone."

"Or..." Sabo put in, eyes widening, "...a group of people. Whitebeard mentioned earlier that the Rouges were focusing their attacks on the Denali. What if the whole thing was an attempt to, quite literally, wipe them off the face of the Earth?"

It made sense, in a sick way.

Many of the vampires had access to bunkers and other protected areas while the D's were out trying to calm and *save* what humans they could. They'd be right in the blast zone.

"And when some survived..." Kidd continued, "the Great Hunt was implemented. Didn't that happen not long after the Fall?"

"A few years later." Sabo responded, digging his nails into his palm. In retrospect, it all fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. The Council's reign, their power and hatred of the D's...their desperate attempt to get rid of them. "The Denali were a major threat to them, and not just because of their relationship with the humans."

"They were capable of killing them." Killer added softly, obviously deep in thought, "And now they rule over us with an iron fist. Who knows how we have unknowingly furthered their agenda..."

"Not all of them are like that." Kidd spit, "My Dad wasn't a founding member and he isn't a crazy *feral*, that's for damn sure!"

Sabo hummed, picturing the current Council in his mind. There hadn't been many member changes over the years, so most of them had been there since the beginning with the exception of Shanks, Kidd's father, and Donquixote Doflamingo, a particularly unsavory pureblood who'd taken the place of a founding member after they died a rather suspicious death.

While the Royal was insane in more ways than one, Sabo didn't think he was a Rouge...he didn't seem the type to bend his knee to anyone.

"We aren't accusing your father, Kidd." He soothed, "It's just that, after reading this, I'm feeling a bit...*betrayed*."

For so long, they'd believed the Council to be infallible. Their word was law and no one questioned it. To think, they wrested power from the ancient Elders and helped create the

world they now lived in, wastes and all.

"Yeah, I know..." The red-haired vampire replied, scowl deepening, "I feel it to. Come on, let's finish reading. I want to know what else happened before Whitebeard went into hibernation." Sabo nodded and turned back towards the journal.

They didn't have much left to read.

### ***December – 2090***

*We have slowly adjusted to this new way of life and the state of our planet. The 'wastes', as the sands are now called, are harsh and not a good environment for any living thing to thrive. The newly formed Council has quickly taken control and started issuing decrees that I'm ashamed to say are appropriate.*

*From our investigation, we have discovered that there are very few humans left and the lucky ones must be protected at all cost...for our own survival. As such, I have made the decision to follow the Council's suggestion and build a Citadel.*

*Using Dr. Vega- technology, we have managed to create our own atmosphere. Marco inputted his own ideas based on a particular human culture, and I can't say I disagree. It will be nice and will prosper on the foundation of our old home.*

*I've decided to name it Moby Dick, after the great piece of literature I enjoyed in the 19th century.*

*There are other Citadels forming around us and I have been advised to collect as many humans as possible before our new territory becomes more crowded.*

### ***January – 2091***

*We have managed to capture a decent amount of humans, many of whom are grateful to have a chance at survival, even if it means in close quarters. It is difficult to say what their fate will be in the future...from what I hear, the Council has decreed them as nothing more than food.*

*I do not wish to see them as animals, but perhaps this is for the best?*

*Here, we can care for them.*

*Here, they will be safe, and all they have to do is give blood.*

*Honestly, the idea is growing on me. If the humans are under our supervision, there can be no risk of harm to my family. Needless to say, the Denali are very much against this. We have already had multiple visits from remaining D's, advocating for the humans' release.*

*But, then again, the Denali are simply gifted humans. Should they desire peace, I am willing to give them shelter and there are ways to remove their abilities so that they may live like any other human.*

*Peacefully...under our guidance.*

*February – 2091*

*We have taken in our first D: Trafalgar Law. He has been around for many years, always fighting against us. His tribe is one of only a few blessed with abnormally long life, and tenacity apparently.*

*Finally, Marco got through to him and he is one of us. The seal and change were both successful, though difficult. His blood caused me great discomfort, but done correctly, it is possible to turn D's into vampires (It is worth noting that this method has not been tested on the purer tribes...hopefully no one will foolishly attempt to change a Gol or related tribe alone. There is a good chance of death). The Council is against it, of course, but they do not need to know.*

*Their hatred of the Denali is unwarranted and I owe them a great deal for standing by us when everything went to -.*

*It seems the poor boy lost everything when the world fell...but now he has a family again. We can also offer him sanctuary from the Council during the 'hunt' they've initiated.*

*Considering his previous role as a D, I have put him in charge of the humans. I know he will do a good job.*

*In other news, the humans are doing well. It has naturally been an adjustment for all of us, but I now see that this is the best solution in our current climate. Perhaps in time, my rage will fade and we can try to return things to how they once were...but not yet.*

When Sabo turned the page so they could continue reading, he was surprised to find quite a few pages missing. It appeared that someone had torn them right out of the book. Sending confused looks to his companions, the blonde pureblood turned the only remaining paper over, revealing a messily scrawled entry.

*October – 3000*

*Betrayal! How could I not see this-*

*After so many years...we took him in, and this is how he repays me. I thought, after Law, that-*

*My injuries are too severe and I have already told Marco that I must hibernate if I am to survive. I do not know how long the healing process will take-*

*I leave this place to my children until I am well enough to return.*

Sabo frowned down at the torn page, attempting to read the last few lines. The parchment was stained with what could be blood...or something similar, and he could only make out three additional words.

*Dark.*

*Feral.*

*Marshall?*

"Someone managed to hurt Whitebeard enough to send him into early hibernation?" Kidd exclaimed, eyes wide, "Must be one tough bastard..."

Killer simply hummed while Sabo gently closed the journal. As fascinating as it was to learn about Whitebeard himself, the information about the Council was of a higher priority. Now that they knew the basics of the 'secret history', they needed to discuss what they intended to do about it.

It was clear Marco and the others held no loyalty for the Council (for obvious reasons) and took in D's at their master's request, offering them sanctuary in return for their allegiance in the past. By showing them the truth, Marco was putting the entire citadel at risk for retribution from the Council.

If they were less than honorable purebloods, the Whitebeards might actually be in trouble, but Sabo suspected he already knew how Kidd would respond.

"Well? What should we tell Lord Phoenix?"

---

Luffy sat on his bed, reclined against the headboard as he waited anxiously for Ace's return. His brother had left twenty minutes before to get him some food but had yet to return with it.

After having to process the emotions he'd been holding in for so many years, he was exhausted, relieved, and *starving* at the same time. Honestly, it'd been a long time since he'd felt so...light. Like a burden had been lifted.

The boy's attention was drawn to the barred door when yet another guard rushed by. For some reason, there'd been a lot of activity around the citadel that started not long after he'd woken up. A glance to the courtyard below revealed many vampires rushing around and yelling orders to each other.

What was going on?

"-it serious?"

"Don't worry about it. We're just being cautious."

Luffy's ears perked up when he heard Ace's voice outside his door. The vampire was talking to one of his guards. Seconds later, the door swung open and his brother entered, a tray in his hands and a frown on his face.

"Sorry about the wait, Lu...it's kind of crazy out there right now."

Luffy was barely listening. All he could focus on was the stack of pancakes on the metal tray, all done-up with chocolate chips and what looked like slices of fruit. His mouth immediately



started to water. It felt like ages since he'd last laid eyes on *fluffy cakes*! Ace chuckled when he noticed his expression.

"Excited?"

"Mhm!" Luffy affirmed, gazing happily down at the pancakes when the tray was placed across his lap, "Thanks, Ace!"

"No problem."

Luffy dug in as soon as he was able to, closing his eyes as he savored the incredible taste. They were just so *good*! He glanced up at his brother after a few minutes of eating. Ace's arms were crossed and he appeared to be thinking about something.

"Something wrong?" Luffy asked, prompting Ace to shake his head.

"No...it's nothing. Just a lot of people around today."

"I-Is it because of me?" The teen stuttered, thinking back to the incident with the Lord. Had he caused the humans in the citadel even more grief?

"I don't think so," Ace answered honestly, turning to stare at the guards outside the door, "but it *is* strange...they've doubled the guard, secured the gates...it's like they're worried about being attacked."

Luffy blinked and slid another fork-full into his mouth, chewing as he looked down on the courtyard again. It *did* look like they were preparing for something.

"But you don't have to worry about it, okay?" Ace continued, flashing him a fanged smile, "Just focus on eating and resting. I'm sure Law will be back any minute to do a check-up." Luffy nodded and re-focused on the magical fluffy cakes before him.

He wasn't particularly looking forward to facing Torao again (given what happened) but right now, all he wanted to do was eat and relax under the watchful eye of his big brother.

...doing his best to ignore the four guards outside, all of whom looked heavily armed.

---

"I've doubled the guard for Luffy-ya's room." Law informed Marco as they walked, "Ace-ya is with him." The blonde vampire nodded in approval. With the uncertainty they currently faced, it was better to be safe than sorry. Should the purebloods turn on them, they wouldn't get anywhere near their young D's.

"And the humans, yoi?"

"They've been temporarily constrained to the indoor portion of their pens. I also ordered the front gate barred, just in case."

Marco exhaled sharply as they rounded a corner, doing his best to keep calm. He knew that what they were doing was likely over-kill, but he wanted to be prepared should a fight break

out. Inwardly, Marco hoped Sabo and Kidd would understand their point of view and not take the Council's side...but it was difficult to predict how they would respond to the secret history.

Would they feel betrayed? Or perhaps they'd become angry at the implications?

There were many vampires that believed the Council to be honorable and their 'saviors' for their actions after the Fall because they didn't know the truth.

Or chose to forget it.

After turning another corner, Marco and Law walked down into the library, where the rest of the Commanders were waiting. They were all tense and prepared for the worst case scenario.

"So...how long have they been in there?" Thatch asked quietly, eyeing the secret room's door with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

"Long enough, yoi." Marco replied, moving to stand in front of the group. The commanders said nothing, understanding from his body language that he wanted them to be patient and wait for the purebloods to emerge.

---

"I'm not comfortable making a decision without seeking advice from someone I trust." Kidd stated firmly, lips drawn in a taught line, "I...I want to call my Father. Are you two okay with that?"

Sabo and Killer nodded, prompting Kidd to dig around in his pocket for a communicator.

'This is for the best.' Sabo mused, 'If we take the Whitebeard's side...it could bring the Council's wrath down on us eventually, but I want to do what's *right*, not what's convenient. Hearing Shanks' opinion is wise.'

Kidd typed in a number and pressed a button on the smaller machine, causing a holographic screen to appear in the air. After a few rings, a red-haired vampire appeared. Shanks wasted no time grinning down at his son.

*"Eustass, my boy! It's been a while! How're things out in the boonies?"*

"It's...good, I guess. Listen, Dad-"

*"OH, have you tried that prank I told you about with Marco yet? It would be so-"*

"Dad." Kidd interrupted, voice serious, "I'm here with Sabo and Killer...we need to talk to you about something important. Something...*sensitive*. Are you alone?" At his words, Shanks' carefree smile fell and he held up a finger. They waited while he leaned his head out of the screen and whispered something to someone before coming back into their view.

*"Benn will make sure I'm not disturbed. Now...what is it?"*

Kidd explained everything as concisely as he could, doing his best not to leave anything out. Throughout it all, Shanks was silent, only asking occasional questions for clarification.

*"I see...so you finally broke through to Marco, huh? He's always been so secretive." Shanks leaned on his one remaining arm (the other he'd lost many years before, according to Kidd), "I will say that everything you read in Whitebeard's journal is true, though not many are willing to speak of it."*

"Even the stuff about the 'Empty King'?" Kidd asked, earning a nod from the elder vampire.

*"Yes, especially that. However, some of the more radical followers of Im's philosophy have mellowed over the years. I believe they've come to enjoy the power and don't want to pass it off to their King just yet."*

When Kidd didn't respond, Sabo stepped in to ask their burning question.

"What do you think we should do, Sir? We are still young and wish to be smart about this."

Shanks hummed and looked him over.

*"Do what you think is right. I told Eustass when he accepted the position of Lord to follow his convictions, no matter what the Council said, and I meant it. Personally, I could care less that they're harboring D's, and I certainly won't tell." Shanks winked before continuing, "Listen, the Whitebeards have been through a lot over the years and are very protective of their own. All I ask is that whatever you decide, be careful."*

With that, Kidd ended their conversation and put the communicator away. With a deep exhale, he turned towards Sabo and Killer, determination clear on his face.

"Okay...I'm ready."

---

Shanks blinked at the static on his screen. Did his son just...hang up on him?

'Rude...' The vampire pouted. He'd hoped to get some more time to talk with Eustass after so long apart, but it seems his son had more important things to think about. Leaning back in his chair, Shanks considered everything he'd just learned.

A lot had changed since the Fall. The formation of the Council all but solidified the Rouges' 'new order' and with the decline of the D's and Whitebeard, vampires saw no need to go back to how things were. It was easier to just control the humans and take whatever you wanted.

Shanks was hopeful that Eustass and his companions (along with the Whitebeards because Marco would definitely come around eventually) would create a ripple in the complacency that plagued their society, one that would eventually become a wave.

It was about time someone did something substantial.

"You finished?" Benn asked, sticking his head back inside Shanks' office.

"Yeah... apparently things are getting interesting over at the Moby Dick," Shanks replied, standing to his feet, "and it doesn't have anything to do with the little gathering Eustass planned."

"Oh?" Benn hummed, lighting a cigarette as he opened the door for him and followed Shanks into the hallway of the compound, "Did he find out about Ace?"

"That's part of it." Shanks continued, voice dropping to a low whisper, "Sounds like Marco revealed everything to test his loyalty."

"Are you going to do anything about it?"

"No." Shanks stated firmly, "Eustass will have to decide where he stands on his own." He knew his son would be peeved at him once he found out he had withheld information about the Moby Dick from him, but this was an important time of personal growth for his beloved son.

Of course, if Eustass asked for advice, he would give it. That's what good fathers did...right?

Truth be told, Shanks and Marco had known each other for a while so he was aware of Gol D. Ace's existence. He was one of the few people Marco had questioned on what to do with the fiery, young D they'd managed to capture. Shanks had actually advised him *not* to attempt to turn him, the risk was much too high and he wouldn't be able to completely seal his abilities (with him not being a pureblood and all).

But Marco was stubborn and had somehow managed it without killing himself.

'And now they've captured another one...' Shanks thought to himself as they walked the familiar path to the meeting room. All Eustass knew was that the boy was sixteen years old and his name was Luffy. He had no idea what tribe he was from. However, based on the fact that the child's blood had healing properties, he definitely had some *Monkey* in him.

Apparently more D's had survived the Great Hunt than he'd anticipated.

When Shanks entered the meeting room, he immediately sighed. There was only one other council member there and it happened to be a particularly *unpleasant* one.

"Akagami, what a pleasure." Doflamingo greeted, grinning eerily at him behind those red-glasses he always wore, "How rare for you to be early rather than late."

"I could say the same about you." Shanks shot back as he made his way to his seat at the large, round table, motioning for Benn to head back to his office. The other vampire just laughed, cackling like a damn hyena.

Donquixote Doflamingo was a strange and dangerous creature. It was no secret that he'd coerced his way onto the Council (likely by killing the one who previously held his seat) and had a history of violence which, ironically, was usually seen being used against other members of their race.

For all his flaws, Doflamingo didn't seem to care one way or another about humans so long as he and his 'family' were kept well fed.

"I hear that boy of yours is a proper Lord now...how quaint." The pink-coated vampire continued, "I do hope the Whitebeards aren't giving him too much trouble."

"He's doing well." Shanks retorted, making sure to keep his response as vague as possible, "From what I know, the Whitebeards are slowly beginning to trust him...but enough about Eustass. I'm more interested in why this meeting was called." Doflamingo snorted in annoyance and threw his head back.

"They're always calling 'emergency meetings'."

Shanks' attention was drawn away from the tall vampire when the door opened and other members of the Council entered. There were seven members in total and he didn't particularly like any of them.

The first to take a seat was Akainu, a founding member and genuine asshole. He had no shame in forcing his ideas on others and had, at one time, been a staunch Rouge. Nowadays, he focused his attention on building up the Royal military and looking down on other people.

Next was Kizaru, a lazy vampire who would essentially do whatever Akainu told him to.

Boa Hancock was a strange vampiress who saw herself as above everyone else (men, in particular). The fact that she was there *at all* gave Shanks pause. He admittedly didn't know much about her other than that she was a founding member who didn't particularly enjoy being on the Council. She spent most of her time at her Citadel in the far East.

Sengoku entered last, closing the door behind him. The broad vampire had been around forever and had been instrumental in creating the Council after the Fall. He was smart, calculating, serious, and currently served as the Head, which basically meant he ran meetings and could call things to a vote. He adamantly denied being a Rouge, but Shanks knew he was.

Sengoku believed in the 'order' Im would bring to the world, or some such nonsense.

"Let's begin." He said as he sat down in his chair. Shanks frowned, eyes darting to the last empty chair.

"Where's Kuma?"

"He is part of the reason we are here." Sengoku explained, placing his hands on the table, "We have received word that he has passed on."

Shanks' eyes grew wide and Doflamingo burst out laughing.

"Fufufufu, oh what a *shame*. Did someone finally off him?"

"It is unclear." Sengoku continued, "However, we have managed to find a replacement so that his seat does not remain empty."

Shanks grit his teeth. This could either be a good thing, or a very bad thing. Currently, on votes that involved the treatment of humans, hunts, and other related topics, Shanks could count on votes from Kuma, Hancock, and occasionally, Doflamingo.

Depending on who was replacing Kuma, they could lose the majority.

"You may enter." Sengoku called, turning to face the side entrance. At his exclamation, the doors creaked open, slowly revealing the new Council member. Shanks' stomach dropped when he recognized the large, round form that appeared in the doorway.

"Muhahaha, thanks for waiting, you pieces of crap!" The vampire exclaimed, making Hancock bristle.

"Excuse me, who the hell do you think you are, speaking to us with such disrespect!?"

"Queen..." Shanks hissed, cursing under his breath. The vampire was one of Kaido's subordinates, a powerful and influential Lord that controlled territory on the continent far to their West. He generally kept to himself but had no doubt jumped at the opportunity to have one of his men sit on the Council.

It was unlikely Queen would sympathize with his attempts to advocate on behalf of the humans.

Sengoku sighed and glanced to Shanks before whispering,

"...it was either him or Charlotte Perospero."

"Ah." Shanks mouthed, for once feeling pity for the Head. Neither choice was ideal, but it was definitely better to keep Big Mom out of the Council than Kaido. She'd been trying to get her claws into them for years.

...unless it was Katakuri. He'd be okay with him.

"What an honor to join this *illustrious* group!" Queen yelled before spinning around on his toes, "I am looking forward to enjoying the perks...I mean...taking my responsibilities very seriously! Now...is it true we get free humans?"

Doflamingo laughed and Shanks buried his face in his hand.

---

When Sabo, Kidd, and Killer emerged from the secret room, they were met with an intimidating sight. All of the commanders had gathered outside the room, armed and serious. Marco stood in front, hands buried in the sleeves of his kimono.

Sabo gulped instinctively. Now that they understood what was at stake, it was understandable for the Whitebeards to take this so seriously.

"Have you made your decision, yoi?" Marco asked, expression neutral. Kidd glanced to Sabo before nodding and stepping forward.

"We have, though I must admit to feeling a bit...overwhelmed."

"Yes...we keep detailed records." Marco answered, "I take it you were all surprised by the truth, yoi?"

"Yeah, that's one way to put it." The red-haired pureblood continued, brow furrowing as he spoke, "I'm going to cut to the chase, Phoenix. We..."

The room went utterly silent as everyone held their breath.

Sabo tensed when the commanders casually placed their hands on their weapons.

This was it...the moment of truth. The moment they'd either sign their death warrants, or become allies-

"-don't care."

Sabo's jaw dropped to the floor as Marco's brow shot to the ceiling.

"I...beg your pardon, yoi?" Lord Phoenix questioned, appearing just as confused as Sabo was horrified. Kidd huffed and shifted his weight onto his left leg.

"Listen, I've never been one to care about the past. So the Council is full of crazy people and the D's are super special...what's new? All I want is to create a united and successful Citadel that will help me achieve my ambitions." Kidd smirked and scanned the wide-eyed group in front of him, "Besides, I wasn't planning on following the Council's mandates anyway. Their rules get in the way, and I won't let *anything* come between me and my dream."

"And what's that, yoi?" Marco questioned, bright eyes betraying his curiosity.

"To see the world restored...as it once was," Kidd explained, straightening up, "and to sail a ship of my own creation across the ocean."

Marco chuckled lowly, causing the other commanders to relax slightly.

"That won't be easy to achieve...but it's a good dream, yoi." The Phoenix then made his way across the room to Kidd and stopped right in front of him, "Very well, if that is how you feel, then we will forget the past and look to the future. All I ask is that you respect Pops' values and how we do things here...especially with the D's."

Sabo blinked at that. Marco had just admitted (finally) that Ace and Luffy were D's.

"Agreed." Kidd replied, clasping his hand in Marco's, "No more secrets?"

"No more secrets, yoi."

Sabo felt his body relax as the commanders broke out into bright smiles, weapons forgotten. They were quickly swarmed and slapped on the back by the vampires, many spouting phrases like 'looking forward to working with ya' or 'hell yeah!'

"My...I'm impressed, Eustass-ya." Law put in, drawing the red-head's attention, "Honestly, I didn't think you could be this mature." Kidd bristled.

"Shut it, Trafalgar...or...whatever your full name is."

"Trafalgar D. Water Law, at your service." The vampire responded, bowing in a teasing manner, "Though it has been a long time since I've gone by that name."

"I imagine you have many questions," Marco interrupted, stepping in front of Law, "so I'll start by answering your most obvious one. We only have three D's in our Citadel: Law, of the Trafalgar tribe, as you've just learned, Gol D. Ace...though he prefers to go by *Portgas* D. Ace, and our newest acquisition, Monkey D. Luffy."

Sabo's heart almost stopped.

"D-Did you say...*Gol*?"

Marco nodded.

"As in the most powerful Denali tribe!?"

"Yes, yoi."

Sabo's hands shook slightly as he pictured the family tree they'd discovered in his mind (having memorized it almost immediately). He vividly recalled the Gol family in the center and Whitebeard's notations about not attempting to turn them.

He also remembered nearly getting into a fight with Ace.

"Perhaps we should move this conversation to a table." Killer put in, motioning with his head to one of many tables that littered the underground library, "I think Sabo needs to sit down."



# Chapter 22

## Chapter Notes

Good evening, everyone! So, this chapter is a bit of an interlude or a 'calm before the storm', if you will. We're going to take a look at some of the other citadels and the preparations for Kidd's big meeting that will take place next chapter. I've also sprinkled some important plot points in ;) Anyway, I hope ya'll enjoy it!

Luffy popped a piece of fruit into his mouth and hummed happily at the taste, his plate of pancakes now empty. He'd made sure to take his time since he wasn't sure when he'd be getting more. With the vampires in control of his whole life (and diet), there was no telling what they'd bring him for each meal.

Ace stood at the end of his bed, looking down at the courtyard. The vampire seemed troubled by the strange activity of the last few hours and had gently moved the curtains back so he could get a better view of the front gate.

"Looks like things are going back to normal..." His brother whispered, eyeing the retreating vampires below. "Wonder what happened."

Luffy followed Ace's movements as he backed away from the window and took his plate from him with a fond smile.

"Thanks, Ace."

"No problem, Lu." He replied, placing the dish on the floor so he could ruffle Luffy's hair, "It's good to see you feeling better."

"Yeah...I do feel a little better." Luffy admitted, thinking back to their earlier conversation. It felt good to finally talk to someone about what happened to him. Plus, he finally felt like Ace was more of a brother and less of a captor, which really helped to reduce his stress levels.

'Though I'm still a prisoner.' The boy thought with a sigh, bunching his fist in the soft blankets around his waist. No amount of good food and brotherly bonding would give him his freedom back.

A knock at the door startled Luffy back to reality.

"Apologies for the wait." Torao said, entering the cell with a surprisingly relaxed expression on his face. Luffy drooped slightly when the door was closed behind him. "Things got a bit... hectic."

"What happened?" Ace questioned, crossing his arms, "Looked like we were prepping for an attack or something."

"Eustass-ya ordered a drill." Torao explained while putting medical gloves on, "Don't worry, it was nothing serious."

Luffy tensed at the name, picturing the scary vampire Lord in his mind. The last time he saw the red-haired creature, he'd accused him of horrible things. Hopefully he wouldn't see him again anytime soon...or at all. The boy swallowed nervously when Torao sat on his bed and gently lifted his chin, so he could get a better look at his neck.

"Now...how are you feeling, Luffy-ya? You gave us quite the scare."

"Okay, I guess." He muttered, glancing up to Ace for support. His brother smiled softly at him, nodding in encouragement. "I-I...I'm sorry...I just couldn't stop myself." Torao hummed and lightly rubbed on the bandage around his neck, reapplying its adhesive.

"It's all right, we don't blame you. If anything, it's Eustass-ya's fault for dredging up bad memories from your past. Marco-ya gave him quite the earful."

"He did?" Ace put in, eyebrow raised in surprise. Torao chuckled lowly at his question.

"Believe it or not, Ace-ya, your sire works very hard to ensure the health and safety of all humans under our protection. There's no way he would stand by while Luffy-ya was pushed to harm himself." The boy bit his lip at that statement, hating how it sounded. Torao pulled off his gloves and fixed Luffy in place with a firm stare. "I want you to rest for the remainder of the day. It will take a while for the sedative to completely wear off."

Luffy nodded numbly, big eyes finding the discarded collar laying on the dresser across the room. He didn't want to wear it again...even if it meant forgoing his outside privileges. Law followed his gaze and quietly made his way over to the device.

"Don't worry, Luffy-ya," The vampire said in a surprisingly gentle tone as he picked up the collar, "You will no longer be required to use this."

"What? Really?" He questioned, surprised his captors were discontinuing the device so soon after it was first introduced.

"I will not condone the use of equipment that causes you more harm than good." Torao continued, pocketing the infernal thing so it was out of sight, "That being said, I recommend you take care to *behave*. There are other instruments I could try...should it become necessary."

Luffy paled, recognizing the statement as a veiled threat.

"I-I understand. I'll be good."

Torao inclined his head, seemingly pleased with his answer.

"Glad to hear it." The vampire then turned to Ace. "Now, what do you say we give your brother some time to recuperate? He's had a long and difficult day." Ace made a sound of agreement and bent down to pick up Luffy's food tray.

"You need anything else, Lu?"

"Not right now...thanks for asking though." Luffy replied, smiling tiredly up at his big brother. Ace winked at him and followed Torao out, locking the door behind him. Once he was alone, the boy nuzzled down into the soft pillow and exhaled slowly, enjoying the silence.

---

The following day, the citadel bustled with activity, everyone doing their part to prepare for the meeting. Marco stood on his balcony overseeing the work, pleased with how quickly everyone forgot the tension of the prior day. In a way, it was like a great burden had been lifted now that they didn't have to tip-toe around the purebloods anymore.

Though...the idea of having to sit in a meeting with their neighboring Lords didn't exactly appeal to him, especially after their recent falling-out with Upper Yard.

"How's it look?" Kidd asked, not looking up from whatever project he was working on. Marco sighed and turned to the younger vampire.

"Good, though you have yet to answer my question as to why you're in my room."

"Wanted to kill two birds with one stone." He said, sticking part of his tongue out as he drew a thin line on his blueprints, "...how're the D's? I haven't seen Ace around much today."

"Ace is probably asleep somewhere, yoi." Marco chuffed, recalling how his fledgling had a habit of 'needing rest' when there was work to be done, "As for Luffy, Law says he's doing fine at the moment. His wounds, new and old, are healing quickly."

Kidd hummed and frowned down at the parchment in front of him.

"Have you had any contact with the Charlotte? About...you know."

"Yes, I spoke with him this morning." Marco continued, "Katakuri will seal the boy as soon as the meeting is concluded, yoi."

While he was glad the pureblood was willing to perform the seal, Marco dreaded having to explain to Ace why it had to be done. From experience, he knew that sealing ceremonies were messy, long, and *very* painful. In a way, he felt sorry for the child...having to endure such a painful ritual at his age.

'But it's for his own good.' Marco thought, passing his hands through the sleeves of his kimono. Sealing Luffy early would allow for him to live out the rest of his life as a mostly normal human, and they wouldn't have to worry about his powers ever developing into something dangerous. Ultimately, it was the best choice for everyone involved.

"We gonna keep hiding all of this from Ace?" Kidd asked while neatly folding the parchment, "From what you said, it sounds like his memories are coming back pretty quickly...why not just bite the bullet and tell him?"

"Because there's a good chance he'll try to kill us, yoi." Marco answered calmly, eyes catching sight of Ace down in the courtyard, slinking out from behind one of the stables with a yawn. Frankly, if he could have his way, he'd rather not tell Ace at all, but there was no stopping his memories from returning now that he'd reunited with Luffy. *"If we tell him, it will be after this meeting and in a controlled space where he won't be able to do as much damage."*

"Geez, you really think he'll turn on you like that?"

"Yes, yoi. He will." Marco added in a soft voice, eyes softening for a moment. Kidd only knew Ace as he was now. He'd never met the angry, violent, *extraordinarily* powerful young D who'd come hunting for the Whitebeard clan all those years ago.

The boy who hated vampires more than anything and most certainly hadn't joined them willingly...though he didn't remember that.

"All right, well, we can talk about it later." Kidd continued, waving off his statement and standing to his feet, "First things first..."

"Would you care for my honest opinion?"

"Sure."

"I don't think this meeting is going to go smoothly, yoi." Marco stated, looking over his shoulder at the retreating form of their young Lord, "Even with Katakuri there, you are gathering some very powerful and opinionated vampires into a small room. There's bound to be conflict."

"Yeah, I know...and I'm looking forward to it."

Marco sighed as Kidd left the room. The pureblood's confidence in himself was commendable but negotiating was not an easy skill to master. Hopefully he'd at least keep them from going to war...or killing each other.

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Luffy stretched his arm out above his head, whining as his spine elongated. He'd had a good night, actually, and was feeling pretty rested after the events of the day before. The boy was currently curled up on the couch in his 'room', desperately needing a break from being in bed.

He hadn't had a good opportunity to truly explore the space until now and was grateful the vampires had thought to give him some of the softest pillows and stuffed animals they had. Luffy hugged a stuffed dog to his chest, smiling to himself.

He was probably too old for these kinds of things...but whatever. He was a prisoner and this was what they gave him to entertain himself, so he was going to cuddle with it.

Luffy hadn't seen Ace, Sabo, or Torao yet today and he was starting to get lonely again. Hopefully someone would stop by soon...

Just as the thought crossed his mind, the guards began to speak to someone outside the door, indicating someone was about to enter. Luffy immediately perked up and swung his shackled feet over the edge of the couch. Who was it? Did they have food?

However, his good mood vanished the second he registered who his visitor was.

"Yo, glad to see you're up and about."

"Y-You-" Luffy managed, curling into himself in fear. It was Eustass Kidd, the current Lord of the citadel. What did he want? The vampire held up his hands placatingly while slipping a bag off his shoulder.

"Relax. I'm not gonna do anything to you." The Lord huffed and took a seat in front of the couch, crossing his legs, "Actually, I'm here to apologize."

"Apologize?" Luffy echoed, still hugging the toy puppy with all his might, inwardly praying his brother or Sabo would come save him. Kidd nodded and leaned on his right hand, piercing eyes examining Luffy's trembling body.

"That's right. I was wrong to say those things to you and wanted to give you a peace offering, if you'll accept it."

Luffy blinked in confusion as the vampire began to dig around in his bag. What was he saying? Vampires didn't ask for forgiveness from humans. Well, he knew some of them were nicer than others, but this was a *Lord*, and he was nothing but the citadel's prized pet.

After what felt like forever, Kidd pulled out a folded piece of parchment and tossed it to him, causing Luffy to yelp in fright and barely manage to catch it.

"Take a look."

Luffy gulped nervously as he worked to unfold the paper. He certainly hoped it wouldn't involve reading...

When he finally managed to open it and examine the drawing, his eyes widened in shock. There, expertly drawn in dark ink, was a schematic for what could only be described as a robotic arm. Its design was sleek and made Luffy's heart rate speed up in excitement.

"T-This is..."

"One of my originals." Kidd explained with a smirk, "Figured it would suck to go the rest of your life with half an arm. What do ya say? Interested?"

"Yes!" Luffy exclaimed, fingers crumbling the parchment slightly, "I-If that's okay?"

"Sure it is, I designed the damn thing with you in mind." Luffy met the vampire's gaze in surprise. He was willing to create something like this...for him? A human? "I just have to get

a few measurements, okay?"

Luffy nodded and placed both the stuffed animal and schematic on the couch, allowing the vampire to approach. While Kidd wrapped a measuring tape around his residual limb, the boy attempted to process what was happening. He was going to get a new arm? A *metal* one?

"Why? I'm just a human." He found himself asking, causing Kidd's gaze to flick to his for a split second before going back to his arm.

"Cause I'm not good at this kind of thing...you know, apologizing. It's easier for me to make something and call us even."

'I thought you did a pretty good job.' Luffy mused, looking down at the tape when it was held against the inside of his arm. Once he was done measuring, Kidd murmured numbers to himself and typed them into a device hanging on his belt.

"All right, I'll come back when I have it done."

Luffy reached out his hand towards the vampire when he turned to leave, catching his attention.

"I-I...thank you."

"No problem. Be good, yeah?"

The boy inclined his head and watched the pureblood leave, excitement bubbling up in his chest.

A robot arm?

*Freaking epic.*

He couldn't wait to tell Ace. His brother would be so jealous.

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## Germa

Sanji hummed happily as he packed his bags for the journey ahead, thrilled he finally had the opportunity to get out of the hell hole he (unfortunately) called home. For once, being seen as completely useless came in handy.

"This isn't a vacation you know."

"It is for me." Sanji shot back, glaring at his sister who never bothered to knock, "In case you haven't noticed, living here isn't exactly a pleasant experience for us *failures*. Father is probably hoping something goes horribly wrong and I don't make it back."

"Oh come now..." Reiju cooed, walking into his room with hips swaying, "Don't talk like that. I'm sure, deep down, he cares."

"Yeah, right." Sanji scoffed, turning his attention back to his bags. His Father, the *great* Vinsmoke Judge, didn't have time for beings with feelings or a sense of morality. Sanji had witnessed firsthand his cruelty and superiority complex.

It was the reason he often found the company of humans to be so refreshing.

Even caged like animals, they were kinder to him than his family ever was. There were a few in particular (most of whom were dead now) that came to mind. They'd accepted scared little Sanji when he needed a place to hide from his brothers and told him stories about things that seemed impossible.

Honestly, he'd expected to be rejected and hated because of his status as a pureblood vampire, a member of the group that oppressed them. And yet, he quickly discovered that if he treated them with respect, they would return the favor.

"I don't know when I'll be back." Sanji said, throwing his bag over his shoulder, "Hopefully not for a long time...or at all." Reiju hummed and stepped forward so she was directly in front of him. He sighed when the vampiress straightened his collar.

"...be careful."

"I will." Sanji replied, gently pushing her away. Out of all his siblings, Reiju was the one he hated the least. She at least had *some* feelings and possessed the ability to be kind, though she often hid it behind a mask of indifference.

As he walked out of his room, he stopped to examine himself in the mirror. His usual suit was stored away for the trip, replaced by a thick leather coat and tall boots that would protect him from the harsh environment outside their walls. The outfit was a bit uncomfortable but necessary if he was to survive the journey to the Moby Dick.

Before he made his way to the garage, he turned, heading out into the back courtyard, one of the only green places left in the citadel after his father last 'expanded' his lab. Currently, it was used as a graveyard. Sanji plucked a flower from one of the mounds where the bodies of unknown and unnamed humans were buried from centuries ago and walked to the largest gravestone in the area.

"Hey, Mom." He whispered, placing the flower on the stone, "I'm finally leaving this awful place, just like you told me to. It's not exactly how I imagined I'd go, but it'll work."

Sanji chuckled lightheartedly, picturing the blonde women in his thoughts. She'd always been so good to him and hadn't deserved the death she'd suffered.

"Anyway, I just wanted to come say goodbye. Hopefully Reiju will keep your grave looking nice while I'm gone. Wish me luck." With that, he stood to his feet and wandered over to the far corner where a mossy stone was haphazardly placed, Sanji's attempt at a proper stone for of the humans he'd befriended years before.

She was a fierce women and had fought bitterly until the end, always trying to escape so that she could get back to her brother. Sanji had actually attempted to smuggle her out but failed,

ultimately causing her more harm than good. She'd died at the hand of his brother, Niji, while he was forced to watch.

'I'm so sorry...' He thought, resting a hand on the little round stone, 'If only I was stronger, maybe you would be leaving with me.'

Furrowing his brow in determination, Sanji stood to his feet and walked to the garage with purpose, sending low-ranking goons scurrying out of his way. Though he didn't use it often, his bike was still in good shape and would serve his purposes well. He coughed when he pulled the tarp off it and began to secure his bag to the back.

"Oh...look who's finally leaving. The *failure*." Sanji grimaced at Yonji's voice, the annoying bastard. A glance over his shoulder revealed that all three of his tormentors had gathered to see him off. How nice.

"What do you three want?"

"Just thought you might want to have a little bite to eat before you left." Niji taunted, throwing a human at Sanji's feet. He growled at the action, recognizing the female as a newcomer his brothers had taken a liking to. She was covered in bruises, bite marks, and barely any clothing.

"M-M-Master Sanji." She stuttered, swiftly crawling up to him so she could hide herself behind his leg. The poor girl's name was Cosette (not that his brothers had bothered to learn it) and Sanji often slipped her food and allowed her to rest in his room during 'feeding times'.

"What did you bastards do to her!?" He snarled, eyes turning red as he rested a protective hand on Cosette's light brown locks. If there was one thing he hated more than anything, it was seeing women mistreated. The fairer sex was to always be cherished like the jewels they were and the knowledge that his brothers laid a hand on Cosette made his blood boil.

"I don't know why you care so much, Sanji." Ichiji put in nonchalantly, "It's just a human. Besides, whether we like it or not, you're going to be representing our family at this conference and it wouldn't do for you to drop dead before then, so drink up. We're kindly offering you sustenance...don't turn your nose up at it."

He knew his brother was referencing his continual refusal to drink directly from humans without their permission. Well, jokes on him, he'd been given blood by a very kind elderly woman just a few hours before, bless her heart. One of the many humans he looked after since his father refused to.

"You're all scum." Sanji growled, wasting no time removing his jacket and placing it around Cosette's shoulders. The girl looked up at him with veiled gratitude, fear coming off her in waves. It pained him to know that she was still afraid of him.

While his brothers laughed (or threatened him, in Yonji's case), Sanji dug around in his bag and pulled out another jacket, slipping it on over his long-sleeved shirt. Once he was once again properly protected, he knelt down and zipped up Cosette's jacket, causing her to jolt in surprise.



"It's okay...I'm going to get you out of here." He whispered, gently cupping her cheek, "Trust me, you won't be harmed."

Cosette nodded numbly and didn't fight when he picked her up and placed her on his bike.

"Oi, oi, what do you think you're doing?"

"This is what you wanted, right?" He said, wrapping his scarf around his face and flipping Cosette's too big hood over her hair, "I'm taking a snack for the road."

Sanji ignored his brothers' protests and slipped goggles over his head, securing them around his face. Once he was ready, he stepped onto the bike, wrapping a protective arm around Cosette's too thin waist. The ride would be hard on her, but anywhere was better than this hell.

"Later losers." He yelled over the sound of his bike's engine, pulling out of the garage at intense speed. Sanji smirked under his scarf at his brother's response, all of them attempting to run after him. Just before he made it to the exit, he flipped them off, causing them to yell something nonsensical back to him.

Oh yeah, totally worth it.

Once he made it out the front gate and into the wastes, he was immediately hit in the face with a face full of hot sand, which was surprisingly refreshing. At least out here, he could feel alive. The ride to the Moby Dick would take a while but he should arrive by the following day, just in time for the mysterious meeting the other clan's new Lord had called.

'Hopefully the Whitebeards will take her in...' Sanji mused, grip tightening around the poor human in front of him. She would be much better off with them than with his horrible family. He'd failed so many times to save humans...the least he could do was save this one. 'Watch over me...*Kuina*.'

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## Rain Base

Crocodile puffed on a cigar, watching the wastes go by out the window of the vehicle that was currently transporting him across the desert. Unfortunately, the journey from Rain Base to the Whitebeard's citadel was long and tedious, which meant more time spent in transit than he would prefer.

"More blood, Sir Crocodile?"

"No thanks." He replied, turning to face Nico Robin. The vampiress was watching him with an amused glint in her eye. "What is it? Do you have something to say?"

"Not at all," She stated, taking a sip from her own cup, "I am simply curious to see how you will interact with the Whitebeards after so long. Did you bring any tribute for them?"

"Why should I?" Crocodile said with a snort, "They call a meeting out of nowhere and expect me to come sniveling with gifts?" Robin chuckled.

"I jest, Sir Crocodile. I doubt they expect anything from you."

Crocodile took another drag, annoyed with the woman's pestering. Frankly, he was annoyed with many things, first and foremost the fact that he had to leave the comfort of his citadel and traverse the damned desert to attend a meeting about who knows what.

'However, it could prove entertaining.' He mused, thinking to the business he'd heard about with Upper Yard. Crocodile enjoyed being witness to the latest gossip and drama amongst the clans. The Lord looked down at his goblet, lukewarm blood shuddering within.

Though he'd love nothing more than to bring a few of his pets along for the ride, it was considered extremely rude to bring humans marked by your citadel to another. To do so was to insinuate their humans weren't good enough and ran the risk of insulting your host.

Crocodile was many things, but he was not uncivilized.

"Did you hear who was moderating the discussion?"

"Yeah...Dogtooth." He answered, lips curling up into a smirk, "Should be interesting."

"Indeed."

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## Totto Land

Katakuri stood apart from his siblings during the Tea Party, lost in thought. Naturally, he was honored to be called by Marco as a moderator, but he couldn't help but think about the other reason he was attending the conference.

'Monkey D. Luffy...' To think that scared little boy was a D. Honestly, it was hard to believe. The kid had been so traumatized by whatever happened to him in that hole it was difficult to convince him to *eat* let alone fend for himself. Katakuri supposed he should've checked harder for the pendant he no doubt had at that time, but he hadn't thought to look.

No...he and his brothers had simply kept him from dying and then left him at a nearby 'watering hole'. Katakuri had been tempted to keep him, but Oven disagreed, convinced the boy would die before reaching Totto Land. Thankfully, a group of humans came by and took the child in. He didn't know what happened to him after that, until he came across him completely by chance a few weeks before.

'And the next time I see him, he loses an arm.' Katakuri mused, picturing the horrific scene in his mind. Would he be even *more* traumatized when he finally saw him again? The poor thing couldn't catch a break.

Still, being sealed would open up opportunities for a peaceful life. He'd be able to live with the Whitebeards without worry and would be well taken care of. Hopefully, little Luffy would understand.

For many D's, to be sealed was the ultimate humiliation, but the boy's abilities had yet to fully develop. From what he heard from Marco, Luffy was likely not even aware of its

existence, but it was smart to snuff it out before it became a problem. Katakuri already had a plan in place to ensure the process was as stream-lined and painless as possible.

All he needed was a quiet room where he could concentrate, clean linens, bandages...what else?

"Not going to join the festivities, brother?" Brulee asked, leaning against the wall next to him with a cup of fresh blood in her hand.

"Too much on my mind."

"About that meeting at the Moby Dick?"

Katakuri nodded. Hopefully he'd be able to keep the Lords in line and seal the young D without any issues...but deals between vampires were notoriously chaotic.

Who knows how it would go...

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## Upper Yard

"Oi, hurry the hell up! I don't have all day!" Enel roared, causing his subordinates to yelp in fear and speed up the process of loading his transport vehicle. It was large and had plenty of space for both him and the group of humans he was bringing with him.

No way was he drinking blood from any of the Whitebeards' filthy horde.

Besides, he had every intention of insulting them in every way he could and this was a damn good place to start. There was no way he would let them get away with the humiliation he suffered during their last interaction.

"Come find me when the preparations are complete." Enel ordered one of his subordinates before re-entering the main building of his citadel. If it was going to take so long, he would wait inside his home in comfort. Eventually, he found himself on a balcony high above the little worker ants who served him.

Oh how he enjoyed looking down on others. The feeling of being in control and having servants who worshipped the ground you walked on was simply *intoxicating*.

"Enjoying the view?"

Enel immediately straightened up at the unfamiliar voice and turned to glare at whoever who stupid enough to invade his personal space. It was a vampire draped in a black cloak, his face hidden except for a greasy, black beard that poked out underneath.

"And who might you be? Speak quickly, and I might make your death painless."

"I'm someone like you...someone who *hates* the Whitebeards and everything they stand for."

"Oh...?" Enel muttered, inwardly debating how best to kill the intruder. He so hated to have his musing interrupted. "And why have you come to see me? Too afraid to confront them yourself?"

"Not quite." The stranger said with a smirk, reaching up to push his hood back. Enel's eyes widened with shock at the vampire underneath. He recognized the man! But he had been missing for so long...where had he been hiding!? "As I'm sure you now realize, I've done my fair share of damage to that clan, and I can offer you the ability to reveal their secrets to the world."

"Why should I trust you?" Enel questioned, "*You*, the man who betrayed his Lord like it was nothing and look like your body is about to fall apart. No offense." It was true, the vampire had pieces of flesh and puss falling off his body like he was diseased. No doubt a side effect of devout discipleship to the Empty King, part of the reason Enel had never gotten involved.

He would never give up his perfect body (or bend a knee to another).

"Unfortunately, I lost my panacea a few years ago..." The vampire admitted sheepishly, flicking a dry piece of skin from his face, "but I fully intend to get him back."

"You haven't answered my question, knave."

"Feel free to kill me, if that's what you want." The vampire said with a shrug, "But if you do, you'll lose your chance to hit the Whitebeards where it hurts."

"You'll have to get a bit more specific." Enel commanded, disliking the vague answers of the other. The filthy creature laughed, showing off his checkerboard teeth. Only his fangs remained in decent shape.

"Tell me...how many D's do you think they're hiding in that citadel of theirs?"

Enel swallowed instinctively and the newcomer smirked deviously.

"More than one, I assure you. And if the council finds out-"

"They'd be *ruined*." Enel finished, suddenly getting very excited, "So, what you're saying, is that you have a way to lure them out for all to see?"

"I do." He answered, stuffing his hands in his pockets, "Interested?"

Enel chuckled darkly to himself.

Damn right he was.

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Notes

Look who's back with a quick update ;) Things will really 'hit the fan' this chapter \*laughs maniacally\*. I originally had it all in one chapter, but it got too long...again lol. Part 2 will probably be up sometime later this week or this weekend. I hope ya'll enjoy it and are staying safe!

'Today is the day...' Sabo mused, standing on the steps of the citadel's main building. Everything was in order and they were as prepared as they could be, but he was still nervous. What if things went south?

"Relax, yoi." Marco said, eyeing him from his place at Sabo's left, "Everything will be fine."

"But what if it isn't?" He shot back, picturing Upper Yard's symbol in his mind. After what happened to Luffy, Sabo held great disdain for the older vampire Lord and honestly wasn't sure he'd be able to control himself if the situation escalated enough.

"Then we'll deal with it." The Phoenix Lord continued, facial expression neutral as always. Sabo was jealous of his ability to remain calm in such a stressful situation, though he supposed it came with experience. "We've spent the last few weeks preparing for this day, yoi. Luffy is secure and Ace is his usual self. It'll be fine, yoi."

Sabo swallowed at the mention of Ace's name. He was embarrassed to say that he'd been purposefully avoiding the D ever since he'd discovered his heritage. Perhaps he was so nervous because of what Marco said about his past? That if (or rather, *when*) he remembered, things were bound to get violent.

What exactly had the Whitebeards done that would piss Ace off so much?

"Sir, you called for me?" The two vampires turned to greet Doma when he walked up the steps towards them. Marco nodded.

"Yes, I have a special task for you during the meeting. I want you to stay with Luffy, yoi. Make sure he stays safe and out of trouble."

Sabo hummed, understanding why Marco was being so cautious. The Lords that would be arriving soon were powerful and they couldn't afford to let them discover Luffy's existence. Doma bowed, causing his monkey to squeak in surprise and wrap his tail around his neck.

"Of course, consider it done."

"Good, yoi. Now go, I believe our first guest will be here shortly."

Just as Doma scurried away, a bell sounded, one that Sabo knew alerted the citadel to new arrivals. The pureblood shuffled nervously and straightened out his kimono. Unfortunately, it was his job to greet their visitors and make sure they reached the meeting room without difficulty.

A few minutes later, the gates opened and allowed a transport vehicle inside. Sabo's gaze immediately went to the side of the car where the sigil of the Charlotte Family was emblazoned. He'd never met anyone from that particular clan but heard that they were...an odd bunch. Still, Marco and the others seemed to trust the pureblood 'Katakuri' or they wouldn't have requested him as moderator.

"Welcome, old friend." Marco called when the vampire exited the vehicle, "I'm glad you could make it, yoi." Sabo noticed that there were some escorts in the car that the newcomer waved off, like he didn't need them.

"I'm honored to be invited." Charlotte Katakuri replied, inclining his head to both Marco and Sabo, "Your citadel appears to be doing well."

"Thank you, yoi." The Phoenix replied, lips curling up into a teasing smile, "Though part of the credit should go to our new Lord and Second. Please, allow me to introduce you to Outlook Sabo."

The blonde pureblood started at the sudden introduction and he hastily made to bow, cheeks warming in embarrassment at his blunder.

"I-It's a pleasure, my Lord. Thank you for making the long trip here." Honestly, Sabo found himself a bit intimidated by the elder vampire. Not only was he quite tall, but he held an aura of power around him that was similar to Marco's. Katakuri bowed slightly to him.

"It was no trouble. Now..." He took a few steps towards him and lowered his voice to a whisper, "How is the young human? The last time I saw him he appeared close to death."

Sabo frowned, suddenly remembering that Katakuri had been present when Luffy lost his arm.

"He's recovering...physically at least." Marco replied lowly, "Law is concerned about his mental health, yoi."

"Have you done anything to address it?"

"...we seem to be making it worse, yoi." The Phoenix admitted, much to Sabo's surprise. It was true though. Everything they tried only seemed to worsen the boy's emotional instability and feed his fear of them. He supposed it was rather unnatural for them to have to worry about a human's mental wellness. Most of the time, they just had to make sure their bodies were healthy. "After the meeting, Law wants to speak with me and the Lord so that we can brainstorm ways of addressing the problem."

"I see." Katakuri replied, straightening up to his full height, "Well, let me know what you intend to do. Perhaps now is not the right time to seal him."

"It is the *only* time, yoi." Marco continued with a huff, "Law has already witnessed his ability beginning to develop. We cannot afford to let it grow any further."

Sabo opened his mouth to give his two cents when the bell sounded again, drawing his attention back to the gate.

"Why don't we continue this in the other room." Katakuri suggested, "It seems another guest has arrived."

"Very well, yoi. Sabo...will you be all right?"

"Y-Yeah...sure." He said shakily, watching the two older vampires retreat into the citadel proper. Now he was alone. Great. But he was the Second! He could handle it...hopefully. The next vehicle that entered was sleek and well-maintained despite being a bit dusty from the drive. Sabo took a deep breath when he recognized the mark of Rain Base, the citadel far to their East.

It was easy to pick out Crocodile from the group that exited the vehicle. His eyes were piercing and he wore a rather elaborate fur coat over his shoulders. Well, that and the giant golden *hook* was a dead giveaway.

"Welcome to the Moby Dick, my Lord." Sabo greeted, bowing to the vampire when he approached him, "My name is Outlook Sabo, I am the current Second of this citadel."

"Yeah, I know who you are, brat." Crocodile replied, making Sabo's eye twitch at the remark, "Damn, this place brings back bad memories..."

Sabo cleared his throat awkwardly when one of the vampire's attendants gave him a large cigar, which he promptly began to smoke.

"O-Of course. I pray you had a pleasant journey?" Crocodile snorted.

"Sure, if you call traveling across the desert *pleasant*."

"Now, now...you're being rude." A vampiress put in, stepping up beside Crocodile. She was quite beautiful with tan skin and dark black hair. "Please forgive him, Lord Second, he is simply a bit tired from the journey. My name is Nico Robin, one of his advisors."

"A pleasure, my Lady." Sabo stated, trying his best to maintain his composure. What was he supposed to do next? Oh right, lead them to the meeting room-

"Yo, Crocy! Been a while." A voice interrupted cheerfully, causing Crocodile to sneer in displeasure. Sabo jumped in surprise when Thatch clapped him on the back, almost knocking him down the stairs, "Why don't you give Sabo here a break? He's new."

"Twin Blade *Thatch*." Crocodile growled, rolling his eyes when the commander grinned at him, "You're just as annoying as I remember."

"Just living my best life, brother!" Thatch continued, winking at Sabo, "Listen, let me show you around! We've got a designated spot for your people to wait while we have the meeting

and I just finished brewing some coffee-"

Sabo sighed in relief when Thatch led Crocodile and his group away. The pureblood was just as intimidating as Katakuri...

Unfortunately, he didn't get much time to rest. About thirty minutes later, the bell rang for a third time. This time, unlike before, Sabo heard the distinct rumble of a motorcycle. Moments after the gate opened, a bike cruised inside, stopping in the middle of the courtyard. He blinked in confusion at the two occupants. Was that...one of the Lords? The vehicle had no identifying marks on it.

Curious, Sabo walked down the steps towards the pair, now identified as a male and a female. The man removed his goggles and scarf, revealing wind blown blonde hair and a curly eyebrow. The woman, much to Sabo's surprise, was a *human*. She was breathing hard and wasn't wearing much except a long jacket. Had they made the whole journey like that?

'But to bring a human...' Sabo mused, 'It was my understanding that they weren't supposed to.' It was considered quite rude to the host citadel.

"Ah, good morning." The blonde vampire said, brushing sand from the human's hair, "Looks like I made it on time."

"Yes, though...I'm afraid you'll have to enlighten me. Who are you?"

"Vinsmoke Sanji." The pureblood practically *spit* 'V' in Vinsmoke, "My Dad couldn't come, sorry."

Sabo made a sound of understanding. This was the third son of Germa's Lord. He'd heard about him, but Sanji wasn't nearly as well-known as the others. Thankfully, their names made it easy to remember their order of birth.

"...and this is?" Sabo asked, eyeing the trembling human. Sanji ran a hand through his tousled locks.

"Er, uh...this is Cosette. I couldn't leave her at the hands of my brothers, so I brought her with me. Actually, I was hoping you all could take her in?" Sanji put a steadying hand on the girl's shoulder, "I know it's not customary but..."

Sabo wasn't sure what to say, but thankfully, he was saved at the last minute (again).

"A human? I'm surprised your Father was willing to let her go." Law put in, walking up to their group with a few of his keepers, "Apologies for eavesdropping, my name is Trafalgar Law, I'm in charge of human care here."

"Nice to meet you." Sanji stated, inclining his head to the newcomer. Law approached the girl and looked her over with a frown.

"She's in pretty bad shape...Cosette-ya, correct?" The girl nodded, clutching at Sanji's jacket in fear, "I suppose we can take her in so long as this won't cause any issues with your Father."



"You don't have to worry about him." Sanji scoffed, taking a cigarette out of his pocket, "I doubt he'll even notice her absence."

Law closed his eyes for a second before motioning for the girl to step forward. She looked up at Sanji who smiled encouragingly at her.

"Don't worry, you'll be safe here."

"I-I-If you say so, Master Sanji." She stuttered, reaching out to take Law's hand. Sabo and Sanji watched as the tattooed vampire led the girl away, no doubt taking her to the infirmary for a checkup. Law was going to be attending the meeting, so he'd probably give basic instructions and then let his men do the rest.

Sabo's eyes widened when he turned back to Sanji. The other pureblood's gaze was full of sorrow for the human, and it was *genuine*. Considering what he knew of Germa, it was surprising.

"We'll take good care of her."

"Yeah, I know." Sanji said, puffing out smoke from his cigarette, "...she's still just...well, never mind. We heading somewhere else now? I want to change clothes before the meeting." Sabo gave the other instructions and called one of the lower ranking Whitebeards over to show him around. Once he was gone, Sabo hummed, unsure what to think of the newcomer.

'He's different somehow.'

It was then that a loud horn blared, causing Sabo to yelp in fright. What the hell was that!?

---

Ace glowered down at the approaching caravan, baring his teeth. It was extravagant, loud, and dangerously excessive. It had to be the group from Upper Yard.

He'd stopped by Luffy's room before coming to perch on one of the stone outcroppings above the courtyard, pleased to see the kid was becoming more and more comfortable around him. Luffy had been particularly excited about a 'new arm' Kidd was apparently making for him, which was a surprisingly thoughtful gift.

It made Ace (mostly) forgive the pureblood for scaring Luffy so badly.

On his way out, he'd run into Doma who was going to be staying with the boy during Kidd's meeting, which Ace approved of. His little brother would probably get lonely and a little extra protection certainly wouldn't hurt.

'I can't believe Kidd is okay with him coming!' Ace thought angrily as the caravan entered the citadel. That bastard had allowed his subordinates to kidnap, torture, and *maim* his baby brother. If this wasn't a diplomatic meeting, he'd tear him apart right then and there. A glance below him revealed that Sabo was also having a hard time keeping a friendly façade up, his eyes flashing scarlet.

Though Sabo was annoying as hell, at least he was just as protective of Luffy as Ace was.

"Ugh...what a dump." Enel stated (much louder than necessary) when he stepped out of the vehicle, dragging about *four* humans behind him. Ace grit his teeth at the obvious attempt to insult them. "Tch, and no one is here to welcome me. How rude."

"Thank you for coming." Sabo managed, stepping forward with a very fake smile on his face, "Enel, I presume? You are the last to arrive."

"...and who're you supposed to be?"

"Outlook Sabo, the Second-"

"*Oooohhh* right...the other whelp who had the misfortune to come to this citadel." Enel interrupted, looking down on Sabo like he was somehow inferior to him, "Where's Akagami's brat? I need to have words with him."

"This way...*Sir*." Sabo hissed, motioning with his hand for Enel to follow him into the Citadel. Ace could barely control his fury. All he could think about was Luffy's pain and the missing limb, courtesy of that bastard. He was walking right below him...it would be easy to-

"Ace, dear." He jumped in surprise at the voice right next to him. It was Izo. The older vampire had apparently climbed up and seated himself next to Ace without him noticing. "Let's try not to murder our guests so soon after their arrival."

"He deserves it." Ace growled, scarlet gaze following the group inside, "You *know* what he did to Luffy, Izo."

"I'm aware, but we must try to be civil...at least for now." Izo continued, make-up and hair perfect as always, "Now come, Marco sent me to find you. The meeting is about to begin."

"I don't understand why I have to go." Ace muttered, wanting more than anything to take Doma's place and spend a few hours hanging out with Luffy. Izo chuckled softly.

"For whatever reason, Lord Eustass feels that your presence is necessary."

Ace sighed and jumped down to the courtyard, followed closely by Izo.

'Let's get this over with.'

---

Kidd straightened his coat and brushed out his hair one last time, annoyed the dark circles under his eyes wouldn't go away no matter how much make-up he put on them. He'd been so anxious about the meeting (not that he would ever admit it to anyone) that he'd stayed up all night working on the human brat's new arm.

It wasn't quite done yet, but pretty damn close. Hopefully he'd be able to finish it after the meeting.

"Kidd, you ready?" Killer asked, poking his head inside his room.

"Yeah, I guess." He muttered, throwing his comb in the sink, "Is everyone here?"

"Unfortunately." Killer huffed, crossing his arms, "Sabo looked like he was trying very hard not to punch Enel in the face. Oh, that's right, Judge didn't come...he sent one of his sons instead."

"That's fine, I figured he wouldn't." Kidd replied, moving out the door to start the walk to the meeting room, "Which one did he send?"

"The third son, Sanji."

'Never heard of him.' The red-haired vampire mused with a shrug. Oh well, so long as Germa was represented. He'd worked very hard on his invention and was excited to show it off. Hopefully, it would be enough to convince the other Lords that his plan was worth their time.

"May I ask you something?" Killer questioned, voice low. Kidd grunted an affirmation. "Why have Ace there? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Sure, but he's also an important member of the citadel." He replied seriously, "I asked Marco about it and he recommended having him there because that's what he would've required. We don't want to make him suspicious or anything."

Killer hummed but didn't verbally reply due to their closeness to their destination. Kidd stopped in front of the door and took a deep, calming breath. This was it, his first official debut as a citadel Lord. His brother nodded to him, letting him know that he would be there to support him no matter what, which gave Kidd great peace.

When he pushed the doors open, all sets of eyes landed on him, watching as he walked to his seat at the head of the table. Kidd immediately noticed that Enel (the bastard) had taken the other end of the table and had a group of scantily clad humans behind him. He was also the only Lord that brought guards into the meeting with him.

Katakuri sat to Kidd's left and nodded to him when he entered while Crocodile simply puffed on his cigar. The Rain Base Lord was leaned back in his chair, looking either very relaxed or very annoyed (it was kind of hard to tell). He had a beautiful vampiress standing at his back, likely his attendant or something.

Vinsmoke Sanji had taken the seat to Crocodile's right, unfortunately close to Enel. He was fairly young, likely around Kidd's age and had a cigarette between his teeth.

On their side, Kidd was pleased to see Marco and Law in attendance, both leaned up against the wall to his right. A few other commanders were present, mostly for security purposes.

'And to keep Ace in line.' He thought, eyeing the D who was securely nestled between Marco and Law. If something went wrong, they had plenty of support available to them. His gaze then swept to the left and met Sabo's, his Second standing near Katakuri on the only side of the room that had windows. He looked a bit stressed but was managing to hold himself together.

"Welcome, everyone. I'm glad you could all make it." Kidd said, bristling slightly when Enel rolled his eyes, "We...have much to discuss."

---

Sabo made himself comfortable against the wall as he watched Kidd take a seat. It was infuriating how *rude* Enel was being.

'He's acting like he owns the place!' He thought, scowling at the vampire in question who yawned obnoxiously, making it abundantly clear that he did not want to be there. 'Why did he even come?'

"Care to elaborate on what was so important that we all had to gather?" Crocodile asked, leaning forward so his hook was resting on the table. At least he seemed somewhat interested in what Kidd had to say.

"Yeah...do tell." Enel sneered, "I would *hate* to be disappointed." Kidd glared at the other Lord when he pulled a young, female human roughly by her collar, causing a sound of pain to escape her lips.

"*Oi*, asshole." An unexpected voice growled, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Enel looked at the young Vinsmoke in confusion before laughing loudly.

"Hoh, what's this? Another young pureblood who thinks he can speak to his betters." Sanji blew out a plume of smoke and, faster than Sabo's eyes could follow, ripped the chains from Enel's hand. The older vampire's guards reached for the weapons while Sanji pulled the women away from him.

"You touch them again, and I'll kill you." Sanji snarled, causing Enel to swivel around in his chair and hiss lightly.

"Don't test me, boy. Those humans are my property and-"

"*Enough.*" Sabo shuddered at the tone in Katakuri's voice. The elder vampire had yet to stand from his seat but could command the room with ease, "Enel, you should've known better than to bring your own humans."

"But-"

"See that they're removed at once so we can get on with our discussion."

Enel growled but allowed Izo to step forward and gently guide the poor humans out the door. Once they were gone, Sanji took his seat again, but not before sending the Lord of Upper Yard a few harsh glares. Recalling the female he'd brought with him, Sabo couldn't help but wonder if the young pureblood would help any woman he came across, human or otherwise.

It was rare to find a gentlemen in the world they lived in.

"Now that that's taken care of..." Katakuri added, turning back to Kidd, "Please continue."

"Right." The red-head muttered, pressing a button on the table to bring up the built-in keyboard. After a few seconds of typing, the middle of the table morphed to reveal a projector. It rotated to face upwards and displayed the schematics for Kidd's invention. The

device wasn't scaled down and appeared to be realistic to its dimensions (approximately four feet in circumference). "I call it...Punk Gibson."

Sabo cringed at the name. Why did Kidd always have to add 'punk' to the front of whatever machine he was making?

"P-Punk...what?" Sanji whispered, eyeing the device with confusion, "What does it do?"

"It's an environmental modification device, similar to what we use in our citadels." Kidd explained, punching a few buttons that caused the hologram to expose the inner workings of the machine, "Except, instead of *changing* the environment, Gibby restores it."

'G-Gibby...dear Lord.' Sabo thought with a huff, 'He's given it a nickname.'

"What, exactly, does it restore?" Crocodile questioned, eyeing the device with skepticism. Kidd smirked.

"I'm so glad you asked."

Sabo looked up when a screen lowered along the right wall, forcing Marco and the others to scoot so they could see. Once fully extended, a picture of the wastes was displayed.

"This is a location just outside of our back door. As you can see, it's dry, desolate, and very, very sandy." Kidd said before pressing a button on his keyboard to change the slide. Sabo's eyes widened at the picture shown there. He admittedly hadn't been paying much attention to Kidd's research and hadn't bothered to go check his 'test site'...but maybe he should've. "And *this* is after one week of exposure to Gibby's special waves."

There, sprouting up from the desert, was *grass*, and bushes, and...was that a tree!? After just a week, the difference was staggering!

"I'm sure you are all smart enough to figure out what my plan is." Kidd stated, eyeing the other Lords with anticipation, "I want to restore the world, starting with the territory around the old city, and to do that-"

"You require our cooperation." Crocodile put in, looking over the picture closely, "If this is real, you've created quite the device, Eustass."

"Yes, IF it's real." Enel scoffed, "I for one, am not so stupid to be drawn in by what has obviously been fabricated. We all know there is no 'restoring' the world after the Fall. Our only havens are our citadels."

"But...we *do* modify the environment inside citadels, why is it so ridiculous to move that technology outside?" Sanji asked, eyes big and full of excitement. It seemed like the young Vinsmoke was quite taken with 'Gibby'. "This would change everything!"

"I'm glad you think so." Kidd replied, motioning with his head out the window to the left of the table, "For those of you who are skeptical, take a look outside. You can see my test area from here." Sabo knew that this was why he chose this room for the meeting. There was no

way the more rational Lords would accept such a device unless they saw the change firsthand.

Crocodile and the others stood from their chairs and walked to the window where they were directed to the now green area in the distance. Sanji's grin grew the more he looked and even Katakuri seemed impressed. Enel didn't bother to get up.

"I must admit...I'm impressed." Crocodile stated once he was seated again, "However, I am concerned how this will affect the hunting grounds. Are they harmful to humans? For that matter...do you have plans to make more than *one*?"

"They're perfectly harmless to both humans and vampires, though they might cause a bit of extra hair growth here and there if you're exposed for too long. As for making more-"

While Eustass answered Crocodile's questions, Sabo found his gaze drawn back to Enel. The Lord appeared to be getting more and more...suspicious, with every passing moment. Like he had something planned and was waiting for the right moment to reveal it.

'Maybe I'm just being paranoid.' Sabo thought, tuning back into the conversation.

"-an alliance? Are you serious?"

"Completely." Kidd answered, "In order for this to work, we need to work together and pool our resources. Otherwise, we'll just be stepping on each other's toes and the restoration will take who knows how long."

Sanji and Crocodile seemed to be considering the offer, but Enel burst out laughing, making Sabo scowl.

"Ha, like I would ever ally myself with the likes of you! The mere notion is *laughable*!"

"So, what, you don't want your territory restored to the way it was?" Kidd shot back, "I mean, honestly, that's fine with me. After what you pulled, I wouldn't trust you to honor any agreement between our citadels." Enel growled slightly at that and the other two purebloods turned to stare at him with raised eyebrows.

"I heard about this." Crocodile sneered, enjoying Enel's discomfort, "Tell me, what happened? You trespass or something?"

"I did nothing of the sort-"

"He stole from us." Kidd explained, drawing a sigh of reservation from Sabo. He just *had* to go there, didn't he. "Not only that, but you also massacred a group of our humans and knowingly took ones that were already tagged. When we finally caught up, you were trying to hide the evidence by *cutting off his bloody arm*."

Sanji gaped at Enel while Crocodile chuckled to himself.

"Is that so, and yet you still came? Trying to redeem yourself, Enel?"

At this point, the whole room was on edge. Marco and Law looked like they were having a great time holding Ace back while Enel's guards were casually reaching for their weapons. For his part, Enel just started to laugh again and abruptly stood to his feet, causing the chair to fall backwards.

"Redeem myself? No, no, no...nothing so honorable. I came for *revenge*." Kidd stood up to face him at that, eyes scarlet in challenge, "You see, I have never been so humiliated in my life, and now you dangle alliance in front of my face simply to mock me? I will not stand for it!"

Suddenly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a small, black box.

"I will *ruin* you and your damned machine!"

Sabo's eyes widened when the box flipped open, revealing a button. Oh no, was that a-

He pressed it, causing the air in the room to displace. Sabo gasped as what felt like a wave of air spread out like an explosion, breaking the windows. However, after a few seconds, it was over. Enel didn't seem perturbed and continued to cackle to himself, even as the commanders prepared to surround him.

"That was the weakest bomb I've ever seen." Kidd mocked, fixing his hair. Katakuri, Crocodile, and Sanji were all on their feet, eyeing Enel with caution when he continued to laugh.

"Oh, that wasn't a bomb. I simply lit the fuse."

Suddenly, a scream of pain reached Sabo's ears. Swiveling around, he was shocked to find Ace on his knees, gripping his head as wisps of flames began to appear all over his body. Just as he was about to call for Law to do something, the doctor also collapsed, leaning against the wall and clutching at his temples.

"No...y-you didn't..." He whispered, meeting Kidd's panicked gaze.

"What did you do, yoi!?" Marco exclaimed, the older vampire forced to step back as Ace's flames grew larger. Enel smirked.

"Well, well, look at that. I got two right off the bat. Tell me, un-pure, did you know that it is possible to overcharge a D's abilities to the point where they can no longer be controlled? It's quite fascinating and, from what I understand...deadly." He then crushed the box in his hand and allowed the pieces to fall to the floor, "Once the damage is done, the Council will crush you. Your love of the demons will be your downfall! Yahahahaha!"

Sabo's stomach dropped as Ace's flames wrapped around him and the entire citadel began to shake. This wasn't good.

---

Marco watched in horror as Ace's body was shrouded in flames, the heat coating him like a cocoon. There was no knowing what monstrosity would be revealed if they let it go for too

long. They needed to do something *now*.

Glancing to his right, he grit his teeth at Law's obvious pain. If he hadn't been sealed, he'd probably be in a similar state to Ace right now...but Pops' seal was holding.

For now.

"M-Marco-ya..." Law managed, bursts of electricity shooting through the air around him, "Put me out, *now*." Not needing to be told twice, he swiftly hit the doctor on the back of the neck, knocking him unconscious almost instantly. Thankfully, the lightning stopped when Law dropped.

'If only I could reach Ace!' Marco thought, carrying Law's limp body away from his fledgling's steadily growing shield of flames.

"What the hell is going on!?" Sanji exclaimed, slowly backing away from Ace. Beside him, Crocodile observed the situation calmly but did have a crease in his brow. He was worried.

"He's awakened his primal state." Katakuri said, making Marco swallow nervously, "I suggest we evacuate before-"

He wasn't given a chance to finish. All of a sudden, Ace's cocoon exploded, singing the floor, ceiling, and anyone that was too close. Inside, a *beast* emerged, one that truly gave meaning to the misplaced name of 'demon'. He was so large, his head touched the ceiling and his demonic wings brushed both walls. His horns framed his animalistic face and his claws were easily big enough to rip a body in half.

Ace had turned into a demon and when he roared, fire emerged from his mouth, catching the room on fire. Marco dived out of the way and coughed as it quickly became difficult to breathe.

"Is this what you meant when you said it'd 'get violent!'?" Kid screamed over the noise, back to the broken window. Marco bit the inside of his cheek.

"No, yoi! I've never seen him like this before!"

While it was true that they'd managed to capture Ace even after he'd awakened his abilities, he most certainly hadn't turned into a *fiery demon from hell*. This was all new and he wasn't entirely sure how to deal with it.

"Yahaha, how wonderful!" Enel laughed as he marveled at the giant creature, "Yes, this is what I wanted! Destroy your *family*, demon, kill them all-"

He was cut off when a pointed tail impaled itself in his chest. Enel choked, spitting up blood as Ace's tail lifted him up off the ground and twisted itself around his rib cage. Marco whispered Ace's name when the fire spread across his tail and burned the vampire Lord, causing him to release a choked off scream.

His subordinates tried to help, but the second they touched the flames, they were also engulfed. With one last wrench of his tail, Enel died, disintegrating into a pile of ash right



before their eyes.

"Oh crap." Kidd managed, unable to hold back his shock at the vampire's sudden demise. To be able to kill a *Lord* with such ease...

If they didn't do something, there was a good chance Ace would kill them all.

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### **A few minutes before Ace's rampage...**

"Do you have any three's?"

"Hmmm...Go Fish." Luffy pouted and took yet another card from Doma. This new game the vampire wanted him to try was hard. Still, it was nice to have something to do.

The monkey in Luffy's lap yawned and nuzzled its head into his knee, asking for pets. He smiled and put his cards down so he could pet it. Unfortunately, it was a bit hard to multitask when you only had one hand to work with.

"Ne, do you think I could have a snack soon?" He asked, feeling his stomach start to rumble.

"Sure, I could get you something." Doma answered while organizing his cards, "What're you in the mood for?"

"Uh...something sweet?"

"Sounds good to me!" The vampire said with a wink, "I bet I could pilfer some ice cream from Thatch's stash. What do you think?"

"Shishishi, sure." Luffy answered, unsure who 'Thatch' was, but very much liking the sound of 'ice cream'. "Is it like pancakes or-"

Suddenly, Luffy was hit with a sense of wrongness, so much so that he thought his heart would stop. Within seconds, he stood to his feet and looked in the direction of the 'bad', accidentally sending the monkey to the floor.

"Luffy, what's-"

It was then that the wave hit him, sending him flying back into the side of his bed. All the windows around him shattered into pieces and the chains hanging from the ceiling clinked together like an earthquake had just shaken the citadel.

Luffy groaned in pain and slowly sat up, holding his head. He could see Doma prying himself off the floor not far away while attempting to avoid shards of glass.

"D-Doma...I feel weird." He muttered, the pain in his head not getting better. If anything, it was steadily increasing with each breath, like something inside him was going to explode. The vampire spoke to him, but Luffy couldn't understand a word of it. Everything was getting blurred and out of control and scary and-

**Luffy. Calm down.**

His head shot up at the voice. Was that...

Luffy blinked to clear his head but the next time he opened his eyes, he was in a strange place full of white. It was quiet and all he could hear was his own breathing. What happened? Wasn't he...at the citadel?

**Luffy...**

"D-Dad? Is that you?" He called out, turning around to try and locate the man, "Wait...does this mean I'm dead-"

**You're not dead.** His father said, suddenly appearing in front of his face. Luffy yelped and stumbled backwards, honestly scared out of his mind. The last time he'd seen his father was...was... **Listen to me, you're channeling.**

"I'm what?"

**Channeling. It means that you've subconsciously called a segment of my memory to you and...you know what, never mind. Listen, all you need to know is that I'm here to help, albeit temporarily.**

Luffy was very confused but couldn't help the tears from forming in his eyes. It'd been so long...and now his Dad was here. He sobbed and threw himself at the cloaked man, hugging him tight.

"D-Dad, I was so scared and now I'm a prisoner and-and I can't get out and-" All of his jumbled emotions and fears were released at once as he cried against his Dad's chest. He'd pretended that he was okay, but he really wasn't...not truly. Nothing at the citadel was *safe*, not even Ace, but now...he felt safe. His Dad would help him.

**Luffy...it sounds like you've been through a lot.**

"Mhm." He affirmed, snuffling along his father's cloak, "They h-haven't hurt me or anything, but...*Dad*, I can't leave. Even my brother won't-"

**Brother? Ah, you met Ace.**

Luffy's head shot up.

"You know about Ace?"

**I did yes...unfortunately, he left just before you were born and never returned. We don't have much time but tell me what's happened.**

Luffy gave him a severely abridged version of everything from his initial kidnapping to the revelation that Ace was his half-brother. His Dad closed his eyes and hugged Luffy close.

**I'm sorry, Luffy. No one deserves to go through what you have and I am sorry that I was unable to help you in your time of need.**

"B-B-But, you're here now, so-"

**Luffy.** Dragon said softly, cupping his cheek. **I died a long time ago. The only reason I am here now is because of the channel. I will have to return to the other side...with your Mother.**

Luffy sniffled and clutched at his Dad's cloak even harder. He didn't want him to leave...not when he got to see him again after so long.

**I know it's hard, but we need to take a look at your current situation. If you subconsciously channeled my spirit, it must be pretty bad.**

With that, Dragon closed his eyes again and hummed, sending visions through Luffy's mind. He gasped at the damage to the citadel and the panic among the vampires. Were they under attack? Luffy's blood went cold at the sight of the monster. Currently, it was crawling its way out of a room and about to reach the courtyard.

Where the humans were.

**I see...someone has gotten their hands on a forbidden device.** Dragon mused, gently removing Luffy from his chest. **Oh Ace...what have they done to you?**

"That's Ace!?" He exclaimed, unconsciously jolting when the beast roared, "What happened to him?" Dragon didn't answer right away and turned to grab Luffy by the shoulders.

**Listen to me, Luffy. At this rate, Ace will kill *everyone*, even the humans. You need to stop him.**

"Me?" He questioned, swallowing nervously. Sure, he was pretty strong, but his strength was nothing compared to a vampire's and he was down an arm. Besides, Luffy was fairly certain giant fire-breathing monsters from hell far surpassed your average vampire in strength.

**You can do this. Use your pendant.** Luffy inhaled sharply when Dragon placed his scarlet pendant in his hand. Hadn't Torao taken it away?

"But I thought you said I shouldn't use my powers!?"

**I know, but right now, you are your brother's only hope.** Dragon shot back, curling his hand over Luffy's so his fist was closed around the pendant. **Ace is a good man who has suffered much in life, similar to you. Save him and bring him back to the light.**

When Dragon began to fade, Luffy reached for him only for his hand to go right through him.

"Wait, wait, don't go!"

**I love you so much, Luffy. Your Mother and I will *always* be watching over you. Now, show me how much you've grown.**

Luffy's eyes shot open and, after a few painful breathes, he realized he was back in the citadel and Doma was kneeling before him, appearing very concerned.

"-ffy, Luffy! Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah." He whispered, turning his head when the monster (now identified as Ace) roared in the distance. Luffy set his jaw and opened his hand, revealing the scarlet pendant. For whatever reason, the pain wasn't so bad now and he could feel his Father's encouraging gaze on his back.

*Save him.*

Ignoring Doma, Luffy stood to his feet and dropped his head back so his face was towards the ceiling. He took a few deep breathes, preparing himself. This likely wouldn't be easy, but he needed to do it. Ace was awkward and sometimes confused him, but was family, nonetheless.

Besides, this would be a good opportunity to get him back for kidnapping him in the first place.

Smirking at the ceiling, Luffy dropped his head forward again and ripped the pendant off its chain, startling Doma.

"O-Oi, Luffy, what're you-"

"Sorry, there's something I have to do." He smiled at the vampire before bringing the pendant to the side of his mouth and biting into it, the scarlet orb cracking under the strength of his jaw.

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Notes

And here it is, the fast update I promised! I hope ya'll enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it :) Merry Christmas!

Marco rushed through the citadel, desperately trying to keep an eye on Ace through what windows they passed. The beast that used to be his fledgling had broken through the wall in the meeting room not long after killing Enel and was slowly making his way down to the courtyard.

"Thatch, take Law to the infirmary and make sure he *stays* asleep."

"Aye!" His brother affirmed, readjusting the unconscious doctor on his back as he ran. Marco grit his teeth as he looked over his shoulder to his many followers. The commanders who were present at the meeting all looked to him for guidance while Kidd and Sabo appeared equally distressed. He felt bad that this happened during Eustass' first presentation as Lord but no one could've predicted Enel's interference.

Yes, right now it was better for Marco to take charge.

"Blenheim, Jozu, go secure the humans. Evacuate them into the main building if you have to." The two commanders nodded and began to talk into their earpieces, no doubt to Law's keepers to coordinate a group effort. In his natural state, Ace would never harm their humans, but as he was now, there was no telling what he'd do. "Vista, escort our guests, Lord, and Second to the library and create a barricade-"

"No way!" Kidd interrupted, stopping on the stairs, "I'm not going to run and hide, Phoenix!"

"It is for the best, yoi." Marco shot back, pointing out the window at Ace's massive, fiery body, "You are our Lord and we cannot afford to let Ace kill you!"

"We can help." Sabo put in, stepping forward, "Just tell us what to do."

Marco frowned at the group before him, inwardly cursing them for their courage. This wasn't the time for false bravado. If something went wrong...people were going to die.

"I for one intend to see this through with my own eyes." Crocodile stated before taking a drag from his cigar, "It's been a long time since I've seen a D run wild..."

"I wouldn't recommend trying to fight him." Katakuri interjected, earning an annoyed frown from Crocodile, "In his current state, his power is far beyond what it was...or should be."

"So that's a D, huh?" Sanji added, eyeing Ace with apprehension, "I can't say I have any experience in this area, but I can fight. If we all work together, we should be able to stop him."

'I'm not so sure about that.' Marco mused, picturing Ace's almost instant kill of Enel. Though there were quite a few powerful fighters in the citadel, not many of them were at the level of a vampire Lord. Unfortunately, he doubted anyone below the level of a commander would last before the demonic beast.

But...how was he supposed to say no to their earnest faces.

"All right if that's what you want. Stay close, yoi!" He exclaimed, continuing their sprint through the citadel. While they ran, Marco sent a citadel wide order for all soldiers who were ranked below commander to focus on protecting the humans and other non-combative personnel. Hopefully it wouldn't take long for the remaining commanders to gather in the courtyard where they could face Ace head-on and corral him away from-

"Look out!" Sanji yelled, prompting the group to stop just in time to avoid a large part of the ceiling falling on them. Ace was almost too the ground.

"Come on!" Marco ordered, leaping over the debris, "We have to contain him before he does any more damage, yoi!"

When they all exited the building into the courtyard, a roar sounded above them, followed swiftly by a shadow that swept across the group, eventually reuniting with its owner. Ace had leapt from the main building and cracked the ground with the weight of his landing. The grass surrounding his flaming body caught fire almost immediately and began to spread dangerously close to the nearby stables. The beast didn't seem to notice (or care) and swiped his tail around behind him, barring his teeth at their group.

Marco flinched when Ace scraped his claws along the ground and straightened up to his full height, wings beating in a display of dominance. His poor fledgling had been reduced to beast of instinct and feral nature.

"Ok, what's the plan?" Kidd asked, cracking his knuckles in anticipation. Marco hummed, taking in the situation as quickly as he could.

"We'll attack him all at once, yoi. If we can just knock him unconscious, that should release him from whatever spell Enel placed him under." Marco commanded, praying his hypothesis was correct. The group collectively agreed to his plan and quickly spread out, each brandishing a different weapon.

Katakuri had his trident, which Marco knew he never went anywhere without, while Crocodile simply held out his hook. The vampiress who traveled with him was there as well and apparently didn't find it necessary to utilize a weapon. Sanji tapped his feet on the ground and moved into a stance that suggested he would attack using his legs.

Beside him, Kidd pulled out his pistols and Sabo clutched a broken piece of pipe in his hands, having snagged it from the debris pile in anticipation of the fight. The commands

present all had their weapons of choice but looks of hesitation flashed across their faces. Marco knew the feeling. He didn't want to have to hurt Ace...but they really didn't have much of a choice.

"Let's go! Don't give him a moment to rest, yoi!"

---

Ace felt like he was floating.

Wherever he was, it was dark, and very, very warm for some reason. He tried to open his eyes but found that he couldn't. When he attempted to move his arms, they wouldn't move either.

'What happened...why am I...?' Ace thought, unable to feel anything except the intense sensation that he was being attacked. Though nothing reached him in the dark place, he followed his instincts, willing his body to repel his enemies so he could sleep.

The vampire exhaled slowly as the warmth and darkness wrapped more securely around him.

'I'll just...rest for a while.'

---

Marco grunted in pain as he body was flung back against the citadel's inner wall yet again, smashed out of the air by one of Ace's massive claws. Thankfully, he'd managed to avoid serious damage, but he was starting to lose stamina. No matter what angle they attacked him at, Ace seemed to *know* they were coming and would move to counter them.

So far, none of them had managed to land a hit on the beast.

Katakuri came the closest, but even the elder vampire was blocked by a wall of flames that sprouted from the ground. It seemed that the longer Ace stayed in one place, the more the environment around him became molten and molded to his will.

"Marco, are you okay!?" Sabo exclaimed, rushing to his side. Marco nodded and pushed himself up onto one knee, breathing heavily. It felt like one of his ribs might've cracked after that last attack.

'This is ridiculous...' Marco thought, watching Sanji barely avoid being roasted alive. They had gathered a powerful group of vampires and yet they were being swatted like flies! Had Enel's device made Ace *too* powerful?

What if...they couldn't beat him?

His gaze swept the smoldering courtyard, taking in the fleeing forms of some of their humans. If nothing else, at least his men were following his orders to take the humans further inside the citadel. Re-focusing his attention on Ace, Marco attempted to formulate a strategy based on what they'd seen of the D's new form.

'We need to get him out of this area, he's drawing strength from the fire around him.'

Suddenly, a cry of pain drew their attention and Marco's blood went cold. Killer had been hit by a violent attack and was currently moaning on the ground, unable to move.

"Killer!?" Kidd yelled, immediately scrambling to his feet in an attempt to save his friend from the raised claw above him. Marco felt his heart sink, immediately recognizing that they wouldn't make it in time. Ace was going to kill him.

However, just before the claw made contact and tore Killer in half, *something* darted out of the main building. Marco was forced to cover his face when Ace's claw hit, sending a cloud of dust and debris flying into their eyes. Coughing, he stood to his feet alongside Sabo, craning his neck in an attempt to see what happened.

He expected the worst but instead, a very unexpected scene unfolded before him.

There, holding Ace's claw with one hand, was Luffy.

---

Sabo felt his jaw drop at the sight of Luffy standing over Killer, his much smaller body trembling slightly from the strain of blocking Ace's attack.

With everything that happened, he'd completely forgotten that they had three D's in the citadel and he hadn't even *thought* to go check on the boy. Had he lost control as well? Were they going to have to fight two Denali at the same time!?

'No...something's different about him.' Sabo thought, taking a moment to examine the human. He wore his off-white shirt and shorts, no shoes as usual, but the chain that linked his shackles together was broken, hanging loosely behind each foot. It was then that he noticed the monkey clinging to Luffy's neck for dear life and Doma's unconscious body slung over the human's shoulder.

He'd managed to protect Killer while holding those two!?

'Okay, that's not normal.' Sabo's thoughts raced as the other vampires joined him in staring at the young D in shock. The Luffy he knew was meek, easily scared, and certainly not capable of fighting off *anybody*. Was this the effect of Enel's device?

When Ace snarled down at Luffy and attempted to dislodge his claw from the boy's grip, Sabo couldn't stop the gasp of fear from escaping his lips. The human was going to die! However, instead of being impaled, Luffy let go of the claw, causing Ace stumble for a split second. Taking advantage of the loss of balance, the young boy jumped and performed an impressive round-house kick that just barely nicked the beast's horns, the force of the attack sending Ace skidding backwards across the scorched grass.

Luffy huffed and glanced to Killer worriedly before meeting Sabo's gaze across the yard. The pureblood was struck by how *different* he appeared. Instead of his usual lowered countenance, Luffy's big, dark eyes met his with a confidence he'd never seen in the human before.

"Sabo!" The boy called, making him jolt in surprise at being addressed, "Catch!"



Suddenly, the bodies of both Doma and Killer were flying through the air, straight at Sabo's face. The pureblood yelped in surprise but moved to catch them, just barely managing to buffer their fall with his own body. Thankfully, Marco was there to pry the dead weight off him so he could sit up.

"Oi, what-"

He stopped short when he caught sight of the determination on Luffy's face. His fist was clenched and his messy hair billowed in the wind as he stood before Ace's demonic form. The beast had recovered from whatever the boy had done and wasted no time roaring and gnashing his teeth at the boy.

"L-Luffy you have to get out of there!" Sabo managed, finally finding his voice again. Now was not the time to stare in awe. His favorite human was going to get *killed*. If vampires were no match for Ace, there was no way Luffy was, even if he utilized whatever D 'magic' was coursing through his veins right now.

"Shishishi, it's okay, Sabo." Luffy answered, flashing him a soft smile. He then said something to the monkey, prompting it to scurry down his arm and race across the grounds to Doma's side. "I'll get Ace back no matter what."

Luffy inhaled deeply and closed his eyes, the wind picking up with each passing second. At first, Sabo hadn't noticed it as much, but now, it was clear that there was something unnatural about the air spiraling through the citadel. When the boy exhaled, the fire along the ground flickered like a candle about to be blown out.

With each breath, the wind became more and more visible, laying upon Luffy like a protective cloak. Across the yard, Ace snarled at his new opponent, pawed up another clump of dirt, and leapt into the sky. The beast spread his wings and flapped until he was a good distance up in the air before diving straight at Luffy's head.

"Oi, kid, you better move!" Sanji called, showing concern for the young D that was just standing there...breathing.

For his part, Sabo thought his heart was going to stop (which honestly wouldn't be a huge deal because he was a vampire...but *still*). He cared about Luffy and would never forgive himself if something happened to him on his watch.

"I have to help him-" Sabo was held back by a hand on his arm. He swiveled around and was surprised to see it was Marco who'd stopped him. The elder vampire shook his head.

"I...don't think he needs our help, yoi."

Before he could completely process what Marco meant, Luffy moved. In a split second, he joined Ace in the sky, rocketed off the ground by a burst of wind. As his small body flew through the air, his single arm was swiftly encased in a black substance, one that glinted slightly in the sunlight.

When the two collided, a shock wave swept through the citadel, shattering any nearby glass and even knocking over trees. Sabo grunted and fell to his knees, knocked off his feet by the sheer force of the collision. Another look at the fight above them revealed that Luffy's fist was currently buried in Ace's cheek, his small body able to bypass the tearing claws of the beast.

Seconds later, he followed through with the hit, sending Ace's massive form crashing through their outer wall like it was paper. Sabo's jaw dropped in shock when the beast kept going, eventually smashing into the ground and creating a large crater in the sandy wastes beyond their front gate.

His sweet little Luffy who loved pancakes, stuffed animals, and petting puppies, had just punched a fiery demon monster *in the face*.

If that wasn't the most awesome thing he'd ever had the pleasure to witness, he didn't know what was.

---

Luffy's heart raced as he floated in the air, suspended by a power he didn't yet fully understand. The second he'd bitten into his pendant, the wind had blanketed his body, surrounding him completely. It'd surprised him so much that he accidentally sent Doma flying through his cell door, knocking the vampire unconscious and flattening the guards stationed there.

He felt bad about it since the vampire had always been so nice to him.

Strangely enough, the armor that coated his hand came to him easier than controlling the wind. Luffy wasn't sure what it was but it was tough and fit his preferred fighting style perfectly.

*Haki.*

The word just...came to him, though he wasn't sure from where.

'Haki...is that what this is called?' Luffy thought, bringing his hand up closer to his face. It didn't feel *complete* to him, but he really didn't have time to think it through, not when Ace had already recovered from his previous attack and, honestly, he wasn't sure how long he could keep this up.

His body already ached from the strain he was putting it through and it'd only been a few minutes.

Steeling himself, Luffy shot through the hole Ace had made in the wall and emerged in the wastes. As expected it was hot and dusty, but thankfully, the weather wasn't too bad. He could see his big brother just fine. The beast roared and slammed his tail against the cracked and dry dirt around him, obviously pissed off.

"Ace!" Luffy exclaimed, landing in front of the creature and doing his best to ignore the heat singing his feet, "This isn't you! You've gotta *stop!*"

As expected, the beast completely ignored him and prepared to attack again. Luffy huffed and raised his fist, a grin appearing on his face. Despite all the pain and difficulty he'd no doubt face after going head to head with his brother, he found himself enjoying the freedom of the fight.

No chains, no walls. Just him and Ace.

"Come on then." Luffy called, widening his stance, "If the only way to snap you out of it is to beat your ass...that's what I'm going to do."

---

Kidd joined the other vampires standing on the outer wall so he could witness the intense fight occurring beyond the gate. With all the sand and dust kicked up in the skirmish, it was difficult to see what was going on. Swallowing hard, he glanced behind him to where Killer was resting with the other injured.

Had the human not stepped in...his brother would probably be dead.

'Why did he do it?' Kidd mused, turning back to the battle in the distance. As far as he knew, the young D had never met Killer and certainly didn't have any reason to save a vampire. During his time in the citadel, he'd had his freedom taken in every possible way. For lack of a better word, he'd been treated like a *pet*, and yet-

"KICK HIS ASS, LUFFY!" Sabo yelled, startling Kidd out of his thoughts. For whatever reason, his old friend was really getting into the fight. For a moment, the dust cleared just in time for them to witness Luffy wrapping his legs around Ace's neck and smashing the much larger being into the ground. "YEAH, GO FOR THE FACE!"

"He's...doing surprisingly well." Sanji put in, lighting a new cigarette, "But he's another D, right? Why didn't he go out of control like the other two?"

"I'm not sure, yoi." Marco answered, watching the duel with a frown, "Even Law, who's been sealed for *years* was affected. Perhaps it's because he's a half-breed, and not from just one tribe?"

"Regardless, we should remain vigilant." Katakuri said seriously, arms crossed, "Though the boy is holding his own at the moment, it's clear his body is having a difficult time keeping up with its new abilities."

At the statement, they all looked back into the desert and focused on Luffy. Kidd bit the inside of his cheek when he saw the claw marks seared down the boy's back and blood coming out of one side of his mouth. He was breathing hard and just...not moving quite right. It was definitely related to fatigue, but-

Kidd's eyes widened in realization.

"I fear it has to do with his youth." Katakuri continued, "His body is just not ready for this kind of power."

"That's not all." Kidd interjected, earning the attention of the gathered vampires, "He's off balance." Sabo inhaled sharply.

"His *arm*. Luffy's not used to fighting without it."

Just as he spoke, the boy stumbled, accidentally attempting to use his residual limb to brace himself, giving Ace the chance to latch onto his shoulder with his fangs. Kidd grimaced when Luffy screamed, blood now flowing down both his back and torso. The young D grit his teeth and used his left hand to grab one of Ace's horns, cracking it in half and hitting the beast across the snout with it.

Thankfully, that caused the creature to release Luffy with a bellow of pain, allowing him to skip backwards and catch his breath. If nothing was done...

"I'm gonna go get something!" Kidd announced, preparing to rush back into the citadel, "I'll be right back-"

"You mean this?" The vampiress, Nico Robin, interrupted, holding up a familiar box. Kidd just stared at it, unsure how she'd known it existed, let alone where to find it. "Forgive me, my curiosity got the better of me and I thought it might be useful."

Kidd was 100% sure she was full of crap but took the box anyway, wasting no time opening it up. Inside was his newest creation, *Punk Pippa*, a prosthetic arm made of a mixture of carbon fiber and aluminum alloy. She was light-weight, durable, and had the ability to connect directly to the nerves in the residual limb of her host body.

Though...there was a problem he'd hoped to address before handing it over.

"I...I didn't get a chance to really make her shine." Kidd mumbled, bemoaning Pippa's lack of luster. Normally he would never give someone something he saw as 'incomplete' but-

"Okay, great! How does it work?" Sabo asked, looking over the arm, "Can we just...I don't know, toss it to him?"

"Uh, no. We cannot just 'toss it'." Kidd replied with a huff, "Honestly, no one should be completing the neural circuit unless they have experience in bio-engineering, otherwise they could really mess the brat up. I was gonna ask Law to do it in an operating room but-"

"I'll do it, yoi." Marco stated, grabbing the prosthetic out of Kidd's hands, "How many actuators does it have?" The red-haired Lord blinked, taken aback by the question. Had the Phoenix done this before?

"Uh...a lot."

Marco sighed and slipped the sleeves of his kimono off his shoulders, exposing his chest.

"In that case, I'll need about ten minutes, yoi. Someone will need to keep Ace off me while I do it."

"T-Ten minutes!?" Kidd spluttered, "You sure it's safe to do it that fast?"

"We don't have any more time to spare." The Phoenix continued, "You forget, Eustass, I was a combat medic back in the day and fought in many battles under Pops' banner. I can amputate a man's leg and replace it with a fully functional automotive prosthesis in fifteen minutes, tops."

Kidd wasn't sure how to respond to that but he figured it was better to take the vampire's word for it.

"Sabo, I need you to go get me a first aid kit, medical gloves, a scalpel, and a clamp. Anyone who's well enough to keep fighting, prepare yourselves."

Kidd swallowed nervously, once again looking out at the battle. The ground beneath them was dead and smoldering while the clouds above were swirling from whatever ability Luffy was utilizing on top of the thing with his arm. To intervene in a fight between two awakened D's...this was not going to be easy.

---

Luffy growled as Ace clawed at him, using his tail as an extra limb. He was really starting to get tired and his body wasn't doing well. His head pulsed with pain and he was fairly certain there was blood dripping from his nose. Were his new powers too much for it to handle?

'I can't think about that right now. I just have to fight!'

"Luffy! Over here!" A voice called, prompting him to forego his next attack in surprise. Currently running towards him waving his arms like a crazy person, was Sabo. Next to him was Marco, Ace's sire, whose arms were full of boxes and other things Luffy didn't recognize. What were they doing?

"Go to them, boy." An unfamiliar vampire ordered, stepping in front of Luffy to block Ace's next attack with his golden hook, "They have something that will aid you in this fight."

Severely confused, Luffy watched as three other vampires entered the fray, successfully drawing Ace's attention away from him. Why were they-

"Come on!" Sabo hissed, grabbing Luffy around the waist and throwing him over his shoulder, "We'll do it over here!" So shocked at the sudden action, he didn't resist. Instead, he watched the other vampires struggle against Ace's attacks. It was clear they wouldn't be able to hold him back for long.

"Uh, what're you guys doing?" Luffy questioned when Sabo finally put him down on the sand and Marco began to pull things out of what looked like a box of medical supplies, "I need to get back to Ace-"

"Not without this you're not." Marco stated, holding up what could only be described as a robotic arm. Luffy immediately made a sound of wonder and leaned forward to get a better look.

"Wow, is that mine!?"

"Yeah, and I'm going to help you put it on, yoi." The vampire explained, swiftly pulling on gloves, "I'll warn you now, this is going to hurt like hell." Luffy nodded and rolled up the sleeve on his right side, exposing the bandaged limb. Marco worked fast and had the skin exposed in just a few minutes.

"What should I do?"

"Hold him still, yoi." Marco ordered Sabo, cleaning the area with cold wipes, "Listen Luffy, if you move during this procedure, you could cause serious damage to your nerves that we won't be able to fix. No matter how painful it is, you *cannot move*, understand?"

"Okay." Luffy replied, steadying himself against the sand. Having another arm would really help in the fight against Ace and he seriously doubted it would hurt more than when he'd lost it. "Go ahead."

With that, Marco wrapped a tourniquet around his upper arm and wasted no time cutting into the flesh of the limb, making Luffy bite his lip to keep a whine from escaping. Suddenly, Sabo snapped his fingers, drawing his attention away from the vampire's work.

"Hey, don't watch him, watch me."

"S-Sabo?" Luffy whispered, wincing at the pain, "D-Distract me?"

"Of course. So listen, I'll be honest, watching you kick Ace's butt is *seriously* entertaining, even if he is currently a giant rage monster."

Luffy held easy conversation with Sabo while Marco did who knows what to his arm. Whatever he was doing definitely hurt and sent pulses of pain straight to his head. He was tempted to turn around and check how the fight was going, but based on the vampires' cries of frustration, it wasn't going terribly well.

"Done." Marco announced after what felt like hours, "Try it out and tell me how it feels, yoi."

Luffy turned back to his right side, mouth curling up into an amazed smile at the metal hand now attached to his body. Everything from the elbow joint down was synthetic but it *felt real*. If he willed it, the fingers would move just like his other hand. Some of the skin on his residual limb was covered by metal, but it didn't impede the motion at all. If anything, it felt like it gave him more support.

He chose to ignore the blood dripping onto the sand, not really wanting to think about what Marco had to do to give him feeling in a metal arm.

"Thank you." Luffy said, standing to his feet. While it felt weird to *thank* the very vampires responsible for his imprisonment, right now, that wasn't important. What mattered was getting Ace back and protecting the innocent people inside the citadel. "Tell your friends to stand back, I'm going to finish this."

Sabo and Marco nodded before rushing back to the citadel, calling for the others as they ran. Luffy opened and closed his new fist over and over as he approached Ace, feeling both

extremely tired and excited at the same time. Now he could fight without any limitations.

As if he felt his determination, Ace turned towards him and howled, causing his animal-like body to burst into flames. Picking up the pace, Luffy sprinted towards the monster that was his brother, willing 'Haki' (or whatever it was) to spread to both arms. As he did so, he felt the wind at his back, causing him to move even faster.

Luffy agilely dodged Ace's first swipe and punched him across the jaw with his new hand, the impact painful but oh so satisfying. He finally had two arms again and the feeling was wonderful.

They exchanged blows for a while, but Ace's fire simply wouldn't go out. No matter how many times Luffy hit him, he refused to go down.

The boy wheezed, feeling his body quickly reaching its limit. He needed to get rid of the flames...if he could do that, Ace wouldn't be as protected. Suddenly, an idea occurred to him. It was something of a crazy idea, and he had no clue where it came from, but it just might work.

---

Sabo tilted his head in confusion when Luffy stopped moving all of a sudden. What was he doing? If he didn't dodge-

"Oi, look at that!" Kidd exclaimed, pointing at the sky. Sabo followed his gaze and was amazed to see a funnel of wind and sand descending from the agitated sky, the once white clouds now a dark gray. A glance back to Luffy revealed subtle green swirls appearing all over his body as he tapped into his heritage, literally bring a storm down upon Ace.

The monster roared in anger when the funnel touched down, capturing him in a windy prison. Luffy slowly moved his hands around, willing the wind to move faster and faster, creating what could only be described as a deadly tornado.

Sabo squinted, trying to see inside the funnel. He could just barely make out Ace struggling to escape, his movements slowing down and fire struggling to survive in the swirling tunnel of wind.

'Wait a minute...this is...' Sabo's jaw dropped when he finally realized what Luffy was attempting to do. He was trying to put the fire out by creating a vacuum! Using his abilities, he'd closed off the top of the vortex, eliminating the oxygen inside. It was brilliant!

After a few minutes, Luffy released the wind, revealing a smoldering lump that could only be Ace. The beast coughed lightly, trying to get air to reinvigorate his flames. Still sporting some emerald specks in his eyes, the young D shot forward and picked up Ace's broken horn.

With impressive agility, Luffy swung up onto the beast's shoulders and held the horn against his neck with both hands, cutting off the rest of Ace's air supply.

The demon tried to knock him off, but he was too weak. It seemed like he was finally feeling the combined damage from all of Luffy's attacks.

"Come on, come on..." Sabo whispered to himself, willing Ace to fall. Finally, after putting up a hell of a fight, the mutated vampire collapsed, prompting the spectators to breathe a collective sigh of relief.

It was over.

---

Luffy felt lightheaded as he threw the horn aside and stumbled off Ace's now limp body. He staggered and almost fell over himself as the adrenaline wore off.

'I...I need to make sure he's okay.' The boy thought, jerkily lowering himself to his knees in front of Ace's head. He placed his new arm against the beast's forehead, rubbing the metal fingers gently into the surprisingly soft fur located there.

"Hey...Ace...it's okay, you're okay now." Luffy whispered, sending a pulse of his own energy into his brother. He admittedly wasn't too sure if that would do anything, but it just felt right. The boy looked up in surprise when the animalistic façade began to crumble before his eyes, turning to ash under his fingertips until only a humanoid body remained.

Luffy leaned forward and caught Ace before he face-planted into the sand, cradling the unconscious (but thankfully alive) vampire to his bloody chest. He exhaled slowly, placing his chin on the vampire's shoulder and hugging him gently.

"W-Welcome back...big brother."

It was then that his body decided to give out and both of them collapsed sideways onto the sand. Luffy figured he should be concerned about the blood pouring out of him and the pain that just wouldn't go away, but right now, he didn't care about that.

He'd saved Ace. His Dad would be so proud of him.

With that, Luffy lost consciousness, and the last thing he remembered was someone kneeling before him, placing a gloved hand over his eyes as if to say...

*Rest. You've earned it.*



# Chapter 25

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! I hope you're all doing well and are safe :) As for me, the region I'm in is stuck in the middle of an unprecedented snow storm, which is kind of cool and terrible at the same time because we don't know how to handle snow and cold weather XD It's to the point where we have no electricity like every hour or so. Anyway, I'm trying to get this posted while we still have power lol and I hope ya'll enjoy it!

Ace woke slowly, his body heavy and aching.

He blinked the blurriness from his vision only to close them again at the brightness. His head pounded as he tried again, this time recognizing the room he was in.

Why was he in Marco's room?

What...what happened?

Ace attempted to sit up, only to find heavy chains wrapped around his body, keeping him immobile. Upon further inspection, the metal also secured his legs together, completely immobilizing him.

"You're awake...thank goodness, yoi."

"M-Marco?" He managed, voice rough and throat dry, "Why am I..."

His sire sighed and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. Ace was struck by how *tired* Marco looked, the bags under his eyes prominent. He was also bandaged, which was crazy. Had they been attacked or something? But there weren't many who could injure Marco...

"What do you remember?" The older vampire prompted in a calm voice, not making any move to remove the shackles.

"I...I remember going to the meeting." Ace started, frowning in an attempt to recall the events of the gathering, "Enel was being a jerk and then...nothing. Did he attack?"

"In a way, yoi." Marco muttered, running a hand through his disheveled hair, "Ace, I'm going to explain what happened and I need you to stay very calm, okay?"

That didn't sound good.

---

When Luffy opened his eyes, he was back in his 'room'.

He took a deep breath and lifted his hands to rub his eyes, only to find that they were handcuffed together. Still, at the moment, Luffy didn't care. He brought them to his face to examine the metal one more closely.

"You're finally up." A deep voice put in, drawing Luffy's attention. The boy let his arms fall back onto his stomach and turned his head towards the sound. When he saw who was sitting in the chair next to his bed, his eyes widened in shock.

"Y-You're..."

"It has been a long time, little one." Katakuri said, scarlet eyes looking him over as he spoke.

Luffy swallowed to wet his throat, unsure what to say. It'd been years since he'd last seen the massive vampire. Why was he here now?

---

*"You must eat, boy." The new vampire ordered, placing a plate of food before Luffy. The young boy swallowed instinctively but wasn't sure he was allowed to have such a nice looking meal. He shuffled as far away from his captor as possible, almost falling off the soft pillow and onto the floor in the process. "It's all right...it's for you."*

*When Luffy continued to avoid the food, the vampire sighed and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look into his glowing eyes.*

***"Eat, boy."***

*This time, it wasn't a request, it was an order.*

*Luffy whined as his body crawled back towards the food against his will and began to take small bites of the bread. While he ate under the watchful eye of the tall vampire, another one entered the 'trailer', causing him to tremble in fear.*

*"You still having to force it to eat? I'm not sure it's worth the effort, Brother."*

*"Oh hush, Oven." The scarf-wearing one chided before carding a clawed hand through Luffy's matted locks, "We don't know what happened to him in that hole. It's only natural for him to be nervous."*

*Luffy eyed the newcomer warily as he moved on to the sweet round things the vampire called 'grapes'. Why had they taken him? Were they going to beat and drink from him just like the monster?*

*"I suppose you're right, though personally, I don't think you should keep him. Why don't we just find a human watering hole and drop him off? If anything, humans seem to care for each other and their young."*

*Luffy swallowed a grape as he listened to the conversation above him. They...were going to let him go? He would be free again?*

*"P-Please..." He whispered, unable to stop himself from eating another grape. However, the sudden silence indicated he had his captors' attention. "I wanna go home." The little boy jumped in surprise when the red-headed vampire laughed and ruffled his hair.*

*"See? Even the human wants back into the Wastes, I saw we oblige it."*

*"Hmmm...very well. If that is what you want, child."*

---

"Are you here to take me with you?" Luffy questioned, watching the tall vampire closely. Katakuri shook his head.

"No, I was asked to come here for a different reason. I must admit, it is rather surreal to meet you again after so long. I'm glad to see you survived the Wastes."

"Mn." He affirmed, taking another deep breath and rolling so he was staring at the ceiling again. The two remained silent for a few minutes, the quiet surprisingly comfortable. Luffy found himself relaxing in Katakuri's familiar presence. This was someone who helped him in the past, despite seeing him as lower than himself.

Eventually, their comfortable silence was broken when the door opened, allowing a tattooed doctor inside.

"Luffy-ya!" Torao exclaimed as he entered the room, wasting no time rushing up to his bed. Luffy glanced to where he'd come from and huffed at the sight of more guards at his door. Had the vampire been talking with them or something? "How do you feel?"

"Tired, I guess...and a bit dizzy." He admitted, shaking his arms to draw their attention to the shackles, "Ne, what're these for?"

"I think you know why." Katakuri stated, raising an eyebrow. Luffy blinked back at him before making a quiet sound of realization.

"Is this because I beat Ace up?"

"Uh...yes." Torao said, shaking his head slightly in disbelief as he helped Luffy sit up. At the change in position, he grimaced, pain lancing up through his shoulder. That's right...Ace had gotten a few good hits (and bites) on him. "Needless to say, after your little display of power, we intend to be more careful."

Luffy drooped at the sight of his ankle chains, obviously replaced after he'd fallen unconscious. He moved his feet around a bit, causing the shackles to brush the floor.

"Is Ace okay?"

"Last I heard, he's still unconscious." Torao explained while tilting his chin up to check a bandage around his neck, "We expect him to wake soon though. Marco-ya is with him." Luffy hummed and smiled softly, happy his big brother wasn't a monster anymore.

"So...why're you here?" He asked, addressing Katakuri. The large vampire un-crossed his arms and gave him a somewhat sorrowful look, that made his stomach drop.

"Marco and the new Lord asked me to come seal you."

Luffy's blood went cold. He knew what that meant...they intended to strip him of his newfound powers. He clenched both his hand and metal fingers, trembling.

"B-But...I-"

"Luffy-ya...I know how you feel." Torao soothed, placing a hand on his shoulder, "I too faced a similar dilemma when Master Whitebeard saved me. Trust me, this is for the best."

'Yeah...for all of you.' Luffy thought, biting down on his lower lip in frustration, 'It'll make me less of a threat, more easily controlled.' Without his powers as a D, he'd just be a human with special blood. The vampires would never let him go!

His hair whipped around him as wind picked up in the room, reacting to his swirling emotions. However, before he could do anything with it, Katakuri placed a firm hand on his shoulder, his claws digging into the skin slightly.

"Easy, little one. There's no need to get worked up."

Luffy stopped struggling when he realized Katakuri wasn't hurting him, simply holding him in place.

"Why shouldn't I? I just got my powers and now you want to take them away!"

"Listen to me, Luffy-ya." Torao said, voice serious, "Before, sealing you was simply a precaution, but now, it's about saving your life."

The boy swallowed hard at that, confusion at the forefront of his mind.

"W-What do you mean?"

"Marco-ya and I did a thorough exam of you after you fell unconscious and we discovered that, though *something* was keeping your powers from overloading during the fight, it quickly dissolved. If we don't seal your powers soon, your body will destroy itself from the sheer strain of trying to control your abilities."

"I don't believe you!" He shot back, voice breaking. There was no way his powers would kill him...right? "I feel fine!"

"That's because Law has taken a good portion of your blood and given you suppressive drugs." Katakuri put in, still retaining his hold on Luffy, "This is the cost of activating your trigger at such a young age. You are simply not ready for the power and our preventative measures will not last forever. If you wish to survive, you *must* submit to the seal."

Luffy's lip trembled. He hated that word: *submit*. It was all he'd been doing since Ace brought him here. But the more he thought about it, the more he recalled his Father's warning about

the pendant (at least, when he'd been alive). Katakuri released him, prompting Luffy to shakily bring his hands back up to his face.

Upon closer inspection, his skin was slightly discolored and a faint green pulse could be seen twisting around his veins. Luffy pressed his lips together and attempted to call forth more wind, only to collapse forward with a yelp of pain. His whole arm hardened and turned green as it attempted to form a mini-tornado, only to create a stronger gale.

"You have to relax, Luffy-ya." Torao encouraged, putting his hand on Luffy's forearm, "Let it go...that's it." After what felt like forever, his arm returned to normal but left a lingering pain that made him wary.

Maybe...they weren't trying to trick him.

"B-B-But I...I don't want to be weak again." Luffy whispered, recalling the confidence he felt upon releasing his power. It'd been a breath of fresh air and now they wanted to turn him back into the obedient little pet he was before. "I want to be *free*."

"There is nowhere to go but here." Torao stated with a sigh, "Please, Luffy-ya, let us help you like you helped us."

The boy let his arms fall into his lap, wondering what his Father or Mother would do in this situation. He wanted nothing more than to bust out with his powers, but if that meant he'd *die*...

*"We will rescue you, Luffy, so please don't die before then."*

Something inside of him relented at the thought of breaking his promise to Zoro. More than anything, he had to live so that he could see his friends again. Besides, maybe they'd let their guard down once his powers were 'gone'? It was weird, but he felt like something inside him was...*hiding* in recognition of the danger.

Waiting to be released when the threat was passed.

Was it one of his abilities?

When Luffy lowered his head, Katakuri nodded in approval.

"Good. We shall begin right away then."

---

Ace's brain was having a hard time processing what Marco was saying. He'd turned into a *literal demon* and went on a rampage!?

"I-I'm sorry...*what*!? You can't be serious!"

"I know it's hard to believe, but that's what happened." His sire stated firmly before standing up and walking to the windows. Ace gasped when the curtains were pulled aside, revealing a dire picture of the damage done.

The entire courtyard was in disrepair, with large boulders and scorch marks littering the ground. It was clear a massive battle had taken place. Ace swallowed hard as his eyes moved to the outer wall where an entire section was destroyed.

He'd...done all this?

"How did this happen? I-I..."

"Whatever Enel did, it caused your blood to completely reject mine, yoi." Marco continued with a huff, "Don't worry, I've completed another renewal that should hold for a while. Unfortunately, that is not all we have to worry about."

Ace's stomach dropped as his sire explained the other repercussions of Enel's attack and his rampage. Apparently, he'd killed Upper Yard's Lord (honestly, he wasn't mad about that) prompting the remnants of his citadel to declare war on the Moby Dick. There was no doubt that they'd be back with an army as soon as they had the Council's support.

The good news was that Crocodile had agreed to an alliance, which was reassuring. His forces would be very helpful in the battles to come.

Sadly, Germa had rejected their proposal, saying their Lord was 'too busy' with his own research to get involved in their war. However, the third prince, Sanji, was interested in helping them and had defected.

"Wait, seriously?"

"Yeah." Marco explained with a slightly small, "He spends most of his time in the kitchens, yoi. I believe he wants nothing more than to see the world restored and to do his part wherever possible."

'Well that's good.' Ace mused, thinking how much work they had ahead of them. He felt terrible that he was the cause of the declaration of war but didn't regret killing Enel. After what he did to Luffy-

Ace's eyes widened and he sat up abruptly, almost falling off the bed due to the restrictive chains.

"Luffy! Is Luffy okay?"

"He's fine, yoi." Marco soothed, reaching out a hand to steady him, "Law and Katakuri are with him now."

"Can I see him?"

"Not yet, yoi. I want you to rest." His sire ordered while fishing around in his pockets for something, "Let me get you out of those chains-"

Suddenly, a bone-chilling scream resonated through the citadel. Ace's blood went cold when he recognized it as his little brother's.

"What the hell...? LUFFY!" He screamed, immediately trying to wriggle free of the chains.

"Ace, relax! Don't get worked up!" Marco insisted, forcing him onto his back. Ace hissed at his sire, furious the older vampire was keeping him from his brother.

"Let me go, Marco! Someone is hurting Luffy!"

---

Luffy held on tightly to the sheets beneath him, screaming at the searing pain his back was currently enduring.

Even though both Torao and Katakuri had explained exactly how the seal worked and that it would hurt, it was much more painful than he'd expected. It felt like his old savior was holding a heated brand to his back.

"Trafalgar, keep him still!"

"I am! How much longer?"

"A few more seconds...hold on kid."

After what felt like forever, the pain ended and Luffy collapsed onto the bed, breathing heavily. His skin burned and sweat dripped down his forehead. He barely reacted to a cold cloth rubbed down his spine, his body shaking from the shock.

"Luffy-ya...can you hear me?" He moaned in response, vision blurry with tears. Someone (either Katakuri or Torao) helped him sit up on the edge of the bed, causing him to become very lightheaded and almost face-plant onto the floor. "It's over...just breathe."

After a few minutes of breathing, Luffy could finally focus his vision. Torao held him upright while Katakuri was at the head of the bed, leaning forward to examine his work.

"You did very well, little one. The seal looks good."

Luffy made a quiet sound of acknowledgement, looking up when Katakuri continued his ministrations, wiping off something slick from his back (probably blood).

"W-What does it look like?"

Katakuri raised an eyebrow at the question but looked around for a mirror, nonetheless. Torao then helped him walk into the bathroom and turned him around so he could look over his shoulder at the new mark. Luffy pressed his lips together at the circular seal.

It almost looked like a deep red magic circle of some kind, with the edges written in runes. The seal was also massive and covered his entire back. Directly in the center was what looked suspiciously like a skull.

"This is Katakuri's personal sigil." Torao explained, ghosting his hands over Luffy's spine, not touching him, "I have Master Whitebeard's, myself. It's part of the sealing process to utilize your blood to enhance it, thereby creating the seal's shape."

"Try to use your powers." The pureblood suggested, prompting Luffy to hold up his left arm. However, when he attempted to create even the smallest breeze, nothing happened.

"It's...it's gone." Luffy whimpered, sniffing to himself. His only chance at escaping...gone. Katakuri and Torao helped him back to the bed, where he shakily sat down.

"Try not to think of this as the end." Katakuri put in while handing him a cup of water, "See this as a new beginning. You will no longer be hunted by the Council and will be able to live a peaceful life here."

"I...I guess." Luffy hiccupped, using his non-metal hand to wipe his eyes. It was hard to go from nothing to something, and then back to nothing in an instant.

"Maybe we should let him rest..." Torao said, standing to his feet and addressing Katakuri, "...let him process things."

"I think that's a good idea."

Katakuri shot him a pity filled glance before following Torao out and leaving Luffy locked in his cell. The boy sniffed and looked up to make sure they were gone before testing his theory. He held up his left arm and, instead of calling for wind, he tried to coat his arm in Haki.

Luffy grinned when the black armor formed without issue, some of his sadness and sense of loss dissipating.

Having two abilities was pretty handy sometimes.

---

Marco finally let Ace out of his room around lunch time, never letting him out of his sight. Honestly, it made him feel like a baby fledgling again. Still, he understood the vampire's caution, considering how much damage he did to the citadel.

Even so, he was pissed Marco had stopped him from going to Lu.

According to his sire, Luffy *screaming* was nothing to worry about. Ace wasn't convinced and intended to sneak away the first chance he got to check on his baby brother.

"Oh, Ace! You're awake!"

He looked up at Thatch's voice, barely able to prepare himself for the flying hug.

"Y-Yeah..."

"Welcome back, fledgling!"

Seconds later, Ace was swamped, vampires from across the citadel coming to hug him or ruffle his hair. He couldn't help but smile at the attention. His family could be stifling sometimes, but at least he knew they cared. When Thatch pulled away, Ace's smile fell.

"You're not...mad?"



"Mad? Of course not." Thatch dismissed, his statement prompting many of the other commanders to not in agreement, "It wasn't your fault that Enel turned you into a giant rage monster."

Everyone, even Ace, chuckled at that, but something bothered him. While his fellow vampires laughed and joked with him, Ace peeked out into the courtyard. According to Marco, they'd been able to bring him down with coordinated teamwork between the commanders and their pureblood guests...but that just didn't sit right with him.

Though he'd been super out of it, Ace hadn't felt like he'd been swarmed by a group of attackers for very long.

No...it had morphed into a duel, he was certain of that.

"So, who did it?" Ace asked, causing the group around him to go silent.

"Did what?"

"Fought me out there." He continued, pointing through the hole in the wall that was currently covered in a tarp, "I don't know how...but I just *know* someone landed the final blow in the Wastes." The commanders glanced at each other, making Ace raise an eyebrow.

"Guys?"

Blenheim laughed sheepishly and clapped him on the back.

"It was all of us, Ace. Honesty, you were so damn strong, it took everything we had to knock you unconscious!"

"Okay, but who-"

Ace frowned when the subject was suddenly changed to the state of the citadel, Marco jumping in to explain how the humans were doing and the status of building repair. It frustrated him that his brothers, his *family*, were hiding something from him. No one seemed to be missing, so it wasn't like he'd killed someone and they couldn't bring themselves to tell him.

What was going on?

---

Sabo sighed, leaning on the railing of his balcony.

A lot had happened in the week since Ace's rampage. The repairs were coming along well, which was good. Kidd was certain the humans could move back into the stables in a few days and that the outer wall would be done by the end of the week.

Which was good considering Upper Yard had declared war.

He supposed it was only natural considering the murder of their Lord but...wasn't Enel the cause of his own demise?

Not that the council would care. According to Marco, they'd been looking for an opportunity to turn on them and there was no way they'd waste it. No, they needed to prepare for war.

'Go be the Second of a citadel...' Sabo thought with a huff, *'It'll be fun*, they said!'

"You still moping?"

"I'm not moping...just thinking." Sabo shot back, replying to Kidd's teasing remark. The red-haired vampire was wearing his 'work clothes' and covered in grease, indicating he was hard at work. "Has Law said anything about how Luffy is doing?"

Katakuri had completed the seal not long ago and it had taken everything Sabo had to not run to his side.

"Said it'll take time for him to process it." Kidd responded with a shrug, "Makes sense...it would suck to lose all your powers after just experiencing them. Other than that, Katakuri seemed to think it went well."

Sabo huffed, on one hand pleased that Luffy was doing all right, but also feeling very conflicted. They'd all but *crippled* the boy who'd put his life on the line to save them. It felt wrong on so many levels. He understood the reasoning behind it: that the seal would ultimately protect him and let him live as a normal human, but...

Did that really justify clipping his wings?

It felt so...selfish.

Sabo was drawn out of his thoughts by a commotion below him. His eyes widened at the sight of Ace, up and walking. So he finally woke up...took him long enough. As much as he hated to admit it, they'd need his strength in the war to come.

Marco had, of course, informed them of the story they were going to go with to keep Ace in the dark, but Sabo wasn't sure how long it would hold, especially if he talked with Luffy.

*"Which is why we will keep them separate, yoi. Now is not the time to tell Ace of his heritage."*

'So when is the right time?' Sabo mused, unsure how he felt about the deception. Ace was smart, there's no way he wouldn't realize something was up.

"I'm gonna keep working on the wall. You want to come?"

"No thanks." Sabo replied, watching as Ace sent a questioning gaze towards the scorched grass, "There are some things I need to do here."

---

Ace ran through the citadel, finally able to breathe freely. It took more effort than he thought to ditch Marco and the others, but he'd managed it.

When he reached the stairs that led to Luffy's room, his thoughts turned sour. The more he ruminated on it, the more frustrated he became. In the past, he'd felt like his companions hid things from him, but he'd brushed it off. Now...it was clear they were much too comfortable lying to him.

It made him wonder how much they were keeping from him.

Ace frowned when he peeked around the corner to the entrance of Luffy's cell. There were four guards, more than usual. Not that it would be enough to stop him. Feeling the need to vent his frustration (and frankly, punch somebody), Ace rushed into the hall and swiftly knocked out the guards.

Poor, weak guards that could handle humans but not a trained vampire like him.

He wasted no time, dragging their limp bodies into a nearby closet. It wouldn't fool the commanders for long but would hopefully give him some time to check up on Luffy.

"Ace?" Luffy asked when he all but broke down the cell door and closed it behind him. The boy appeared pale but otherwise okay. Though the handcuffs on his wrists were surprising. Ace's eyes widened at the new, metal arm attached to Luffy's residual limb. When had they done that?

"Lu, are you okay? I-I heard you screaming earlier."

The boy blinked and pursed his lips in understanding.

"Oh yeah, that. I'm okay." Ace stood by his bed, content to wait for an additional explanation. Luffy hadn't screamed for no reason...he'd been in *agony*. "Katakuri had to do a...a thing to my back."

"A thing?"

"Y-Yep..." Luffy muttered, looking away from him. Ace huffed, annoyed his little brother was also attempting to keep things from him. "I-It didn't hurt at all."

"*Luffy*, please don't lie to me." Ace stated firmly, grabbing the boy by his shoulders. Luffy looked up, obviously startled by his tone and response. "I'm sick and tired of all the secrets from Marco, and Thatch, and...and..."

Luffy gazed at him with those big, expressive eyes of his, evaluating him. Under the human's searching gaze, Ace felt his tough façade drop away. His knees buckled and he collapsed onto the floor, hands moving to pull Luffy's small body into his chest.

"L-Lu...I'm *scared*. I feel like I don't know anything anymore." He sobbed, resting his chin on Luffy's shoulder, "Marco told me what happened, but things aren't adding up and-"

He stopped when Luffy returned his hug (putting his shackled hands over his head), the little human's body warming his ever cold one.

"What can I do to help?"

"I-I...don't know. I just feel like, if I could just *remember*..." Ace hissed, releasing Luffy to rub his temples, "It's so frustrating Lu! It's like they don't trust me anymore."

The human hummed and kicked off his covers, swinging his chained ankles over the edge of the bed and patting the mattress beside him. Ace sniffled and plopped next to him, unsure what else to do. It was then that he noticed the extensive bandages across Luffy's body and the oversized shirt he wore. However, before he could ask him about it, the boy spoke up.

"I think I can help you remember."

"Really?" Ace questioned, scooting a bit closer, "How?"

The boy huffed before baring his neck and pointing to the arteries located there.

"Drink my blood."

It took a few seconds for him to register what Luffy was suggesting.

"W-What!? No, I can't do that!"

"Sure you can." Luffy chirped with a smile, turning to face him, "My blood has healing properties so it should bring your memories back, right?"

Ace...hadn't thought of that.

"I suppose...b-but, Lu," He swallowed nervously, eyeing the bandaged neck, "I've never taken blood directly from a human before. I could seriously hurt you."

"No you won't." Luffy determined, smile never dimming, "You're my brother."

The innocence and complete trust in that statement took him aback.

"Are you sure, Lu?" As much as Ace was against the idea, he was desperate to remember something...*anything*. He was done just sitting back and taking it like a good fledgling. If Marco was going to continue lying to him, he'd go back as far as his brother's blood would take him. Luffy nodded and offered him his only remaining flesh arm.

"Yeah, I think you need this."

Ace swallowed nervously as he took Luffy's arm in his hands (pulling the metal one along with it) and ran his thumbs over the subtle flesh of the elbow joint. He knew from his training that the elbow was the second best place to drink from, after the neck of course. Ace glanced up at Luffy, earning an encouraging nod.

"Go ahead."

Instinctively glancing towards the door for fear that someone would see them, Ace extended his fangs and slowly bit into Luffy's arm. The second he started drinking from him, he detached and retched, almost gagging on the putrid taste. His brother just laughed.

"Damn it, Lu...that's *disgusting!*"

"Shishishi, I know, but it'll work. You have to keep going."

Ace huffed and tried again, this time determined to not let go and drink as much as he could without causing Luffy any harm. As the blood entered his system, he felt his head start to pound and the mark on his back begin to burn. But, despite the pain, he refused to stop. It was time he knew what was really going on.

After quite a few large gulps, Ace gasped as images began to flow into his head.

Were these...his memories?

His *past*?

# Chapter 26

## Chapter Notes

I have returned! Though it took me a while, I finally finished this chapter :) We're going to take a look at Ace's past and the fall-out that happens after he remembers. I hope ya'll enjoy!

Ace was born during a sandstorm in a rundown old house that he would call home for the earliest years of his life. His parents, Portgas D. Rouge and Gol. D. Roger, were members of the Denali tribe and took great pride in their heritage. His father, generally a carefree and jolly man, would only ever become truly serious when speaking of their history and their long fight with the vampires.

When he was five, in keeping with tradition, Ace received his pendant. It was pure white and symbolized his induction into the clan even though there weren't many of them left. Roger reminded him often of the devastating power the pendant could release and that he shouldn't use it until he was ready.

All things considered, Ace had a fairly standard childhood. The wastes were a hard place to live, but when it was all you ever knew...you adapted. He recalled a few gutsy vampires stumbling across their humble home, but they were always swiftly dealt with by his Father.

Roger was Ace's hero...the epitome of strength and what it meant to be a Denali. He trained everyday to be as strong as him.

To kill vampires like him.

There was only one time Ace remembered truly being scared, and that was when Roger told him about his illness. It couldn't be cured and would take his life in only a few years. He became angry and banged his fists against his father's chest, sobbing out barely recognizable words.

*NO, you can't-*

*Please...don't leave us alone!*

Despite the revelation, they lived another two years in peace without any issues, but when Ace turned ten...Roger died. He remembered that day vividly; walking into their tiny, one-room home to Rouge's tears and his Father lying on the bed, pale as a ghost.

*"He's gone, darling...he's gone."* Rogue managed, her voice barely a whisper in her grief as she pulled Ace's much smaller body to her chest. Strangely enough, he didn't shed any tears at the news of Roger's passing...not even when they buried him on a hill behind their house.

Ace did, however, cry when they discovered a vampire had raided the newly dug grave, defiling the resting place of such a great man. Rogue re-buried what she could find before ordering Ace pack what meager possessions he owned.

They were leaving.

He understood why they left. Without Roger to protect them, they were at risk of being attacked, but he still hated the fact that they had to leave at all. Ace was in a bit of a daze throughout that whole journey and honestly didn't remember much of it. He recalled stopping at sanctuaries and eating some questionable meat...but nothing more. All Ace could think about was how they left Roger and their home behind, all to meet up some *other man*.

*"He's an old friend, darling...he'll help us."* Rogue continuously said as she tried to stay optimistic. Ace, however, grew more and more bitter the farther they traveled.

Eventually, they found the man they were looking for: Monkey D. Dragon. He was a weird looking guy with tattoos all over his body, but since he was also a Denali (albeit of a lesser tribe), Ace tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. Dragon invited them to live with him in his home that was structured almost the same as their old one, just slightly bigger.

Rogue agreed and they moved in with him the following week.

Ace quickly discovered that things were very different living under Dragon's roof, and he wasn't sure he liked it. First of all, the vampire attacks were much more frequent. Dragon said it was because of their proximity to some high profile citadels, which made Ace wonder why they didn't move farther away. Second, unlike Roger, Dragon believed that they should hide their abilities and try to live as normal humans.

*"Ace, you must understand-"*

*"No, I won't hide who I am!"*

This particular issue caused quite a lot of conflict between the two that only increased when Rogue and Dragon decided to get married. Ace, now fifteen, spent most of his time training out in the wastes, determined to get strong with or without Dragon's blessing. It was also around this time that he started hunting vampires.

The first one he killed was just a feral, practically an animal. He'd be lying if he said it hadn't scared the crap out of him to face one alone, but it also gave him an outlet. Finally, Ace had a purpose (*a reason*) to use his powers and offer his Mother the protection she deserved. Sure, Dragon would fight if the vampires got close, but he wouldn't chase them back to their nests.

By the time Ace was seventeen, he could kill even high ranked vampires without much difficulty. Dragon said he was 'lucky' since his abilities manifested early, likely due to his bloodline. To Ace, he took it as a sign that he was meant to kill the creatures that wanted nothing more than to kill them. His flames grew in strength every day and he put them to good use. Rogue often discouraged him from hunting, but Ace refused to stop. He was doing it to protect *her*, after all.

On his twentieth birthday, Ace decided to leave home. He just felt so stifled and needed more challenging prey. Dragon, naturally, opposed this decision heavily, as did Rogue.

*"Your Mother is pregnant, Ace! She needs your protection now more than ever."* Dragon argued, making Ace bristle.

*"And who's fault is that, huh!? Look, I'm sorry, but I need to do this."*

As soon as the words left his mouth, Ace felt terrible. There was another life in his Mother's belly...a *sibling*. It was wrong of him to say the pregnancy was inconvenient or an annoyance just to validate the plans he had for the future.

*"I'm sorry, Mom...I-I just-"*

*"It's all right, dear..."* She soothed, reaching out to place a hand on his cheek, *"You are restless...just like your father always was."* Dragon looked down as Rogue gently placed Ace's hand on her swollen belly.

*"Just promise me this...promise you'll come back and be a proper older brother."*

*"I promise."*

Little did he know that he would never see his Mother or Dragon again.

---

A few months after he left home, Ace started to make a name for himself in the wastes. He became infamous for how many vampires he'd killed and reveled in the fame. None could contend with him no matter how many were sent. One day, while he was resting in a sanctuary, an old man gave him a warning before serving him his drink.

*"You should be careful boy...we're close to Whitebeard's territory, and they don't take kindly to their own being attacked."*

He knew about the ancient citadel, of course, but had yet to fight a vampire with their mark. Ace smirked and slammed his empty cup on the dirty bar.

*"Oh yeah? Maybe I should go introduce myself."*

And so began his one-man war on the Whitebeards, which admittedly, wasn't very successful at first. The vampires he marked would run before he even got within range, which told him they were aware of his abilities. Eventually, he became so frustrated with his lack of success that he attacked a camp of vampires from another clan, one much less known, and completely wiped them out.

If anything would gain the attention of Whitebeard's officers...it was showing off his strength and how serious he was. Vampires were a blight on the Earth and needed to be killed so that humans could live peacefully and not fear for their lives every time they went outside.

Just days later, the 'Lord' of the citadel appeared before him, introducing himself as Marco the Phoenix.



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"Phoenix, huh?" Ace replied in a mocking voice, "What'd you do to earn that nickname?"

His opponent was very composed and did not react much to his attempt to rile him up. Marco simply observed him closely while removing the combat jacket he was wearing. Ace noticed his eyes flashed red but the vampire made no attempt to ensnare him.

"I received that title because I am very difficult to kill, yoi." The vampire answered while tossing his jacket aside and shifting his weight slightly, "What about you, Vampire Slayer?"

"I'm pretty sure you know how that name came about." Ace shot back, readying himself for battle, "Isn't that why you're here?"

"The Council sees you as a threat...and I am here on orders to kill you, that much is true." Marco continued, half-lidded eyes tinged with sorrow, "That being said, I can't help but feel regret at having to end the life of such a young child, yoi."

Ace scoffed and willed flames to appear in his palm.

"Child, huh? Try saying that again when you're a smoldering pile of *ash*!"

Their fight lasted nearly three days, with both of them taking incredible amounts of damage but refusing to back down. Ace had to admit that Marco was tough and would be difficult to beat. As the blonde vampire stood to his feet yet again, Ace prepared another attack, but stopped when his opponent suddenly held up a hand.

"Enough of this, yoi. I'm sorry, Ace...but this must end."

"Giving up? I'm surprised."

The vampire shook his head.

"Not giving up, yoi...just changing tactics." Suddenly, shadows appeared above him, prompting Ace to leap backwards. He grit his teeth at the appearance of ten other vampires, all powerful. "I apologize for this, but...I believe that killing you would simply be a waste."

Ace sneered at the vampires who slowly moved to surround him.

"Oh...you're going to try to capture me? Good luck, bastard!"

Fighting all the Commanders together proved to be too much for Ace. Merely two hours later, Ace was thrown to the ground and backed up on his elbows in an attempt to escape the encroaching vampires. Suddenly, he was full of regret.

*No...I have to get back to Mom and the baby!*

*Oh, and Dragon to.*

"Surrender, Ace. There is nowhere to go, yoi." Marco ordered while moving to stand at the head of the group. Ace, still breathing hard, just smirked.

"No...I don't think I will." Ignoring all warnings given to him by Dragon and even his Father, Ace swiftly reached into his shirt, pulled out his pendant, and bit it in half. Almost immediately, his body was filled with power and his mind went blank.

---

When Ace woke, he was seated on the floor of a completely empty room with his hands chained behind him and his ankles tethered to a link directly in front of him. He wasted no time glaring at Marco and the other commanders who surrounded him even though his ears were ringing so much he couldn't hear much of what they said.

"-not a good idea, Marc." One vampire said, finally coming into focus, "I mean, he's *awakened*. This 'kid' nearly killed all of us...and we're not pushovers."

"I know, but what other option do we have, yoi? At least this way...he will live."

"Yeah, but...is that really a good thing?" Another put in harshly, "Sure, he's young, but he's killed countless numbers of vampires."

"This is my decision...I will take responsibility if it goes wrong, yoi."

"But you could die!"

"Enough of this. We will do it together."

Ace growled, unable to speak because of a cloth wrapped around his head and between his teeth. It was then that the monsters noticed he was awake.

"Welcome back, little hunter." Marco greeted, kneeling in front of him. The only comfort Ace had was the fact that not one vampire in the group had gotten out of the fight unscathed. They were all covered in bandages from head to toe. Unfortunately, it appeared that he hadn't managed to kill any of them. "We were just discussing what to do with you, yoi."

Suddenly, someone removed the gag from behind, causing Ace to cough lightly.

"Is that right? If you're going to kill me, just get it over with."

He glared at Marco when the vampire shook his head, almost in pity.

"We aren't going to kill you Ace...you're going to join us."

Ace's eyes widened in horror as the vampires unhooked him from the floor and began to remove his shirt.

"N-No...you *can't*!"

"Yes, we can. Just relax...it'll be over soon."

He struggled as much as he could against the grip of his vampire captors, desperate to get away. To become a vampire was a fate worse than death. He'd rather die!

"NO, don't touch me! STOP!"

The vampires didn't respond to his desperate, angry, and fearful cries. They simply kept holding him and gripped his hair to expose the sensitive area of his neck. All Ace could think was that if they succeeded, he'd become the very monster he desired to destroy.

He'd hurt people...like his Mom and baby sibling who's gender he didn't even know yet.

"You'll regret this." Ace managed, growling at Marco who approached him with blood red eyes, "I won't become your *thrall*." The vampire smiled softly down at him in a way that appeared more menacing than anything.

"Oh Ace...don't worry, you won't be a slave." He grit his teeth as Marco grabbed his chin and forced it away from him, further exposing his neck so he could whisper in his ear, "I'll make sure you forget all of your anger...your pain. We'll take good care of you."

When the fangs sank into his neck, all Ace could feel was pain and fear. It was like all his memories were exiting his body through the two puncture wounds and soon, he knew nothing.

---

Ace gasped and released Luffy's arm, stumbling back until he collapsed onto the carpeted floor of the human's cell. He tried to calm down, but he just couldn't, not when he finally remembered everything. Suddenly, his 'first' memory of waking up in the infirmary with his new sire seemed so insignificant compared to the rest of his life.

"A-Ace, are you okay?" Luffy called, holding his metal hand to the wound in his arm in an attempt to stop the blood flow. Ace numbly nodded and shakily made his way back to the boy on the bed, his *sibling*. He wrapped Luffy's arm with bandages leftover from Law and sat down next to him, staring at the far wall with a blank expression.

Everything the Whitebeards told him...was a lie. They'd *forced* him into their clan and kept him from returning to his real family. Ace felt fury build up inside him. How could they do that to him!?

"Ace?" Luffy questioned quietly, placing a gentle hand on his arm. He exhaled slowly and put an arm around the boy, the only *family* he had left.

"Sorry, Lu...just thinking. I can't believe how much I forgot..."

"So you remember? That's great!" Luffy chirped, lips curling up into a bright smile that immediately made Ace think of his Father, Roger. For whatever reason, his little brother was more like *his* Dad than Dragon.

"Yeah...my full name is Gol D. Ace...I'm a Denali, just like you." Luffy looked startled by that statement, but quickly recovered.

"Shishishi, so the secret's out, huh?"

"Why'd you try to hide it from me?" Ace asked, prompting the boy to droop and shrug.

"Marco and the others warned me to keep it a secret, or else."

'Those bastards *knew* that knowledge would trigger something.' Ace thought, seething at how easily they misled him...and they did it for years! Had he not found Luffy, would he still be blindly following their orders with no idea who he truly was?

It pissed him off that Marco would *dare* to threaten his baby brother.

Luffy looked up when Ace stood to his feet and grabbed the chain between the handcuffs that held the boy's hands together. He'd love to remove them (along with the ones on Lu's ankles), but they were made of a special material that would be very hard to break. It'd be easier to wrestle the key off Law.

"Come on, Lu. I need to give those bastards a piece of my mind."

Luffy made to object but didn't have time to as he was pulled to feet. Almost instantly, he cried out in pain and collapsed to his knees.

"What's wrong!? Are you okay?"

"S-Sorry...it's my back..." Luffy managed, making Ace gently lay the boy over his left arm so he could lift up the back of the shirt. What he saw made his blood go cold.

"They...they sealed you." He said in barely a whisper, horrified he'd allowed such a thing to happen to his family. It was the ultimate humiliation for a Denali. "When...? Who?"

It was then that he remembered the scream he heard only hours before.

They'd done it right under his nose and even kept him from going to Luffy's aid.

"Katakuri did it." The boy explained, straightening up slightly with a bit of effort, "Guess they got scared when I beat you up, shishishi..." Ace grit his teeth, feeling even more responsible.

"I'm so sorry, Lu."

"It's okay...it's not all gone." Luffy said with a glint in his eye as he made his flesh arm turn black. Ace gaped and gently ran two fingers across it, impressed at how strong the 'armor' felt.

"Damn Lu...you're amazing."

Luffy just laughed and allowed Ace to help him to his feet. He was careful moving the boy, given his injury, but that didn't stop Luffy from babbling about all sorts of 'forbidden' things. Apparently, now that his memory was back, the kid didn't feel the need to keep things from him anymore, which was refreshing.

"Wait so, 'Katakuri' is the same guy who saved you?"

"Yeah, he's cool." Luffy said with a tiny shrug, "I mean, the sealing sucked, but he was nice about it."

Ace made a mental note to not beat up Katakuri as much as the others given the fact that he'd protected Luffy when he couldn't. When they left the room, Luffy looked nervous, but Ace didn't stop. He wouldn't let anything happen to his precious little brother, especially now that he remembered exactly how Lu fit into his life story.

If only he'd stayed home...maybe he could've witnessed Luffy's birth.

A few minutes later, they emerged on the ground floor and earned a few glances. Ace ignored them for the most part and tightened his grip of Luffy's arm so he could better steady him.

"What're you up to, Ace?" Shachi, one of Law's keepers asked, eyeing Luffy with curiosity, "I thought the Captain ordered him to be on bedrest."

"Luffy needed some fresh air." Ace lied, eyes wandering around the room as he searched for his targets, "Hey, where's Marco?"

"I think he's with the purebloods."

"Right...but where."

"Uh...probably the gathering hall, if I had to guess."

"Thanks." Ace all but hissed, assisting Luffy as they continued their trek through the citadel. He hated having to drag the kid out of bed, but he didn't want to risk confronting Marco when his brother wasn't close enough to protect. It would be terrible if they used Lu against him. "You okay?"

"Uh huh." Luffy affirmed with a short nod, "I just...are you sure you want to...you know."

"Definitely. I have to confront them, Lu. After everything they did-" Ace trailed off and Luffy closes his eyes briefly in understanding.

"Okay, just don't do anything you'll regret."

---

Sabo huffed as they continued to go over their resources and what needed to be done to prepare for the upcoming battles. There was just so much...especially after the damage caused by Ace's rampage. He looked up from his papers at the other occupants of the room.

Kidd was whispering with Law about something while Katakuri simply stood off to the side, seemingly deep in thought. Marco stood just to Sabo's right and had a hand on his chin while Thatch had his feet on the table, entertaining himself by throwing an orange up and down.

"If we can stick to this timeline, we should be ready with time to spare, yoi." Marco stated, apparently pleased with Sabo's work, "Though our enemies outnumber us, we do have quite a few resources on our side."

"When do you think they'll come?" Kidd asked, entering the conversation. Marco hummed.

"I can't be sure, but I suspect in a few months, yoi. Vampires never seem to do battle quickly and the Council will need time to gather their forces."

"Plenty of time..." Kidd whispered while bringing out a map of the surrounding areas, "Do you think we'll be able to evacuate the city before that?" Before Marco could reply, the door was all but kicked open, revealing a very angry looking Ace and...Luffy? Katakuri frowned at the sight while the others simply straightened at the sudden intrusion.

"Ace? What're you doing up-"

Before Thatch could even finish his sentence, Ace left Luffy behind in the doorway, rushed forward, and punched Marco right in the jaw. Sabo watched in shock as the old vampire skid across the floor, traveling a few meters from the force of the hit. What the-

"You *bastard*...how could you!"

"Uh oh..." Thatch whispered, looking pale. Sabo, for his part, wasn't sure how to respond to the D's fury. Marco stood to his feet holding his jaw while Ace fumed where he stood, breathing hard like an angered beast.

"Ace, yoi..." Marco started, but the raven-haired vampire didn't let him finish.

"No, I don't want to hear your excuses! I remember everything, Marco. *Everything*."

Sabo gulped and glanced over to Kidd who had a frown on his face. Lord Phoenix had warned them that Ace would get violent when his memories fully returned...did they need to prepare for more damage to the citadel? Still in the doorway, Luffy padded forward awkwardly, watching Ace with big eyes.

"I see...and how did that happen, yoi?" Marco probed, not moving from where he stood. Ace snarled, his eyes turning red briefly.

"Luffy's blood restored the memories you all but *ripped* from me." Sabo's eyes moved to the small human and noted the bandage around his arm.

"Ace-ya, please, be reasonable-" Law tried, only to stop start when fire erupted from Ace's shoulders. Sabo started at the sudden heat. Hadn't Marco just sealed him!?

"Shut up, Law. You're just as guilty as the rest of them. You were there, weren't you? The day they kidnapped me and turned me into a vampire against my will." Law's expression said it all. "That's what I thought."

Seconds later, Ace had a pistol in his hand, one with the Whitebeard's sigil on it, meaning it could do some serious damage. The angry vampire wasted no time aiming the weapon straight at Marco's head.

Sabo swallowed hard, unsure what to do.

"You should've killed me when you had the chance."

"I don't regret what I did, yoi." Marco replied in a calm voice while putting his hands in the air, "I...no, *we*, turned you to save your life...gave you a family."

"You *stole me* from my real family." Ace sobbed out, his hand shaking as tears formed in his eyes, "Because of you, I wasn't there when my Mom and Step-Dad were attacked...they *died*, Marco...and Luffy had to suffer through hell in a damn hole in the ground as a blood slave for a psycho!"

At the mention of that, Sabo turned to stare at Luffy. He had no idea something so terrible had happened to him...was that why he was claustrophobic? The small human's bottom lip trembled with emotion.

"A-Ace...at the time, we didn't know you had a family." Thatch put in, sorrow and regret clear on his face, "We thought you were just some kid in over his head. I know this doesn't make up for what we did...but I'm sorry." Ace turned his attention to Thatch for a second before meeting Marco's gaze once again.

"You're right, it doesn't. Sorry but I'm not in a forgiving mood."

"Killing Marco won't bring your parents back." Katakuri suddenly said, startling Ace. Luffy sniffled and looked up at the tall vampire, not moving when the pureblood approached him. Ace immediately whirled around and trained the gun on Katakuri, skin going pale when the vampire placed a hand on Luffy's head. "I know it's not my place to intervene in this matter, but I will say this: though you were separated for many years, you have finally been reunited with your little brother. Do not taint this memory with murder."

Ace trembled slightly, though Sabo wasn't sure if it was from sheer emotion or pure anger. He breathed a sigh of relief when Ace lowered the gun a few inches. Maybe Katakuri had gotten through to him!

"You're right...revenge won't change anything..." Then, he suddenly whirled around and fired a shot directly into Marco's thigh, causing the vampire to cry out in pain, "but it will make me feel a little better."

While Law and Thatch crowded around the now injured Marco, Ace holstered the gun and stalked towards the doctor. Sabo made to warn them, but Trafalgar seemed aware of the approach and stood to his feet.

"Give me the key to Luffy's cuffs." Law frowned.

"Why?"

"Because I can't stay in this place anymore," Ace said, holding his hand out, "and there's no way in hell I'm leaving without my little brother."

---

Ace said nothing to the bystanders who watched him pack up his bike, Striker. He hardly ever used it, but now it would be the vessel that got him out of the citadel that ruined his life. Ace didn't pack much, but enough to survive for a while in the wastes. He turned around when someone cleared their throat.

It was Izo and Luffy, the little human now free of his shackles.

"I hope this is acceptable?"

He smiled fondly at his little brother who was out of 'human' clothes and dressed in clothing appropriate for the wastes. Luffy wore a long-sleeved tan tunic along with long pants and boots that would help protect him from the sun while they traveled. Izo had also given him a scarf that was wrapped around his neck (reminiscent of the one he'd first found Luffy wearing) and a hood on the back of his jacket.

"Yeah, thanks."

Ace knew that Izo had only volunteered to complete such a request as a peace offering to him, which he appreciated, but it wasn't enough to make him stay. His emotions were just too jumbled and his anger too fierce to simply forgive and forget. Still, it was nice that none of them were trying to stop him...they hadn't even contested when he insisted Luffy come with him.

"It's soft..." Luffy whispered, tugging on the tunic before smiling at Izo, "Thank you!"

"No problem, little one."

About an hour later, Ace felt like they were ready to leave and a large crowd gathered around them, consisting mainly of commanders. He glared at Marco who limped out into the courtyard, aided by Blenheim. Sabo and Kidd exited behind them and descended the stairs like they had something to say.

"Um...Luffy?" Sabo said, earning the boy's attention. Ace frowned as the pureblood approached *his* little brother. Though he wanted nothing more than to pull him away from Sabo, he resisted the urge. "I know it's not much, but I got you a few things...uh...for the road."

Luffy blinked in confusion as Sabo handed him a bag and glanced to Ace. He nodded, knowing for a fact that Sabo cared too much about the kid to actually hurt him. The boy pulled the string off and immediately grinned.

"Woah, picture books!" The small boy exclaimed, immediately opening one with the picture of a cat on it, "Thanks, Sabo!"

"You're welcome." The pureblood responded, reaching out to ruffle Luffy's hair. Sabo then turned to Ace, looking sorrowful. "Where will you go?"

"I want to visit my Mom's grave." He answered, turning to face the still broken outer wall, "After that, who knows...away from here."



"Be careful." Katakuri said, appearing out of nowhere, "There are many unsavory characters out there, especially now that war is on the horizon. I'm sure you know that there are those who would do anything to acquire your brother's blood...so don't do anything rash."

"I know." Ace shot back, frustrated the pureblood didn't seem to think he could protect his little brother. Still, he couldn't stay mad at the man, not after everything he'd done for Luffy. It was clear the older vampire was just concerned about his brother's safety.

"Ace..."

He growled and met Marco's gaze, his sire looking more sad than anything else.

"What?"

"No matter what happens, or where you go...you will always be welcome here, yoi."

"Thanks, I guess." Ace muttered under his breath, unwilling to respond or interact with Marco too much or risk becoming extremely angry again. "Lu, you ready?"

The boy nodded and mounted the bike, gazing at its machinery with big, excited eyes. Ace joined him moments later and pulled the kid's hood up before starting the vehicle. With one last glance at the place he used to call home, Ace rode out the front gate and didn't look back.

---

A few hours after Ace and Luffy left, Sabo found himself sitting on the steps of the courtyard feeling a bit depressed. It all happened so fast...while he didn't miss Ace all that much, he was already feeling melancholy knowing Luffy was gone.

'Why did Marco and the others let them leave so easily?' Sabo mused while leaning on his hand. He and Kidd decided not to get involved which cost them one of their best fighters (unfortunately, Ace had his uses) and Luffy, the human with the special, healing blood. He imagined that once the war began, they would regret giving Luffy his freedom.

"A penny for your thoughts, yoi?" A voice asked, prompting Sabo to look up. It was Marco, looking a little worse for wear.

"Lord Phoenix, are you sure you should be moving around?"

"I'd rather be out here than indoors right now." The elder vampire replied while taking a seat next to Sabo. He glanced down at his bandaged leg, noticing it had been properly treated since Ace drove off. "Something tells me you don't approve of our decision to let them go, yoi."

"I don't...but I guess I don't really understand the circumstances." He admitted with a huff, "Forgive me, but Ace was pretty upset and it sounded like his anger was justified." Marco sighed and gently laid a hand on his bullet wound.

"We always knew this day would come, though we did everything we could to prevent it. It's true that we turned him forcefully...but at the time, we felt there was no other option to ensure his survival."

"Why did you care so much for him?" Sabo questioned, recalling what he knew about Ace before he became a vampire, which wasn't much, "He was just a human...one who was trying to kill you, correct?" Marco closed his eyes briefly before answering.

"At first, I was just following orders...but during our fight, something changed." Sabo frowned and leaned forward slightly, curious what the other vampire was referring to. "It's... difficult to explain but all of a sudden, my desire to kill him all but vanished. All I could think about was how young he was and how much of a waste it would be to kill him. It wasn't until after he turned that I realized why I acted the way I did."

"...what, are you mates or something?" Marco laughed at that.

"No, definitely not, yoi. Ace and I have the same blood type."

Sabo's eyes widened at the revelation. It seemed like a small thing but blood types could drastically change a vampire's behavior under the right circumstances. According to the textbooks, it created a feeling of comradery with particular humans that the Council deemed 'a weakness'.

"It's strange how blood connects us, despite our differences." Marco continued, smile dimming slightly, "I will say that, looking back, we were cruel to him...but I don't regret saving him, yoi. Hopefully, one day, he will forgive us for being so selfish."

Sabo hummed quietly and went silent, sitting with Marco and listening to the babbling creek nearby. It was clear that the Whitebeards had long since adopted Ace as one of their own, even if their relationship had a rocky start. It was clearly difficult for them to let the fledgling go...but if they were going to make amends with Ace, releasing him from his chains was a good start.

"...and Luffy?"

"I will admit, losing him is a blow, yoi." Marco said with a frustrated huff, "Without his blood, we will probably have more casualties during the upcoming battles. But it wouldn't have been right to try and separate them after everything that happened. Thankfully, Law has a few bags saved...they will have to do."

"Aren't you worried that he'll fall into enemy hands?" Sabo asked, "That would be terrible!"

"Ace is strong, yoi. Besides, I imagine he'd rather die than see harm befall his kin." Marco trailed off and gazed at the closed gate across the yard, "Though this all happened at a very inopportune time...my brothers, sisters, and I determined long ago that we needed to make an effort to atone for what we did. Forcing Ace to stay would only break what fragile trust he has left for us."

Before Sabo could respond, Blenheim came rushing towards them at break-neck speed, almost bowling over a smaller vampire who was attempting to pick up some debris left over from Ace's rampage.

"Marco, you've gotta come see this!"

"What is it, yoi? What's wrong?" Lord Phoenix questioned, grimacing as he stood to his feet. The larger vampire swallowed harshly and tried to catch his breath.

"Just come see."

Sabo helped Marco around the building to the back garden where a large group had gathered. He recognized Law, Kidd, and the other commanders...but what were they gawking at? They made their way through the crowd until they got a good view of the 'thing' in question.

He raised an eyebrow at the sight of Stefan, the dog who'd taken Luffy on an impromptu run all those weeks ago. The dog seemed agitated and was quite literally running in circles, barking excitedly.

"What's up with him?"

Marco frowned and limped forward, whistling for Stefan to come. The dog panted happily and yipped as he trotted up to Marco, placing a paw in his hand. Sabo craned his neck in an attempt to see what was going on, especially when the vampires around him started to whisper amongst themselves.

"Care to explain what's going on, Phoenix?" Kidd called, crossing his arms. Marco stumbled to his feet, prompting Stefan to take a few steps and settle down at his side.

Sabo's breath caught in his throat when he met the dog's now golden irises. They definitely hadn't been that color before...what did it mean?

"Marco...could it be?" Izo whispered, his hand in front of his mouth in shock. Sabo was surprised to see tears forming in his eyes, disturbing his always perfect make-up. Marco smiled shakily, eyes watering as well while Stefan slapped his tail against the ground in obvious happiness.

"Yeah...Pops is waking up."

# Chapter 27

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I hope you are all doing well :) I don't have much to say about this chapter except that we have some long over-due fluff lol. For those of you holding out for Zoro and the others to re-appear, know that they will be returning soon. I hope ya'll enjoy the update!

It didn't take long for the news of Whitebeard's stirring to spread throughout the whole citadel. While the humans looked on in confusion from their pens, many vampires celebrated and hugged each other like they'd heard the greatest news in their life...which frankly, it probably was.

Sabo turned his attention from the window to the others in the room. They'd called an emergency meeting to decide what to do.

"Wait...Whitebeard? As in *Whitebeard!*?" Sanji exclaimed, biting down on his cigarette in shock, "I thought he was in hibernation!" The young Germa prince was invited to the meeting mostly because of his status. Well, that and the fact that Kidd found his insights to be useful especially with regards to anything occurring in his dysfunctional family.

"It was never supposed to be permanent, yoi." Marco answered, sitting to allow his injured leg to rest, "An...*incident*...occurred and Pops was severely wounded. He had no choice but to hibernate so his body could fully recover."

"It must've been pretty bad if he's only just now waking up."

"Yeah...it was bad." Thatch put in through gritted teeth, "One of our own betrayed us and tried to kill him." Sabo frowned, recalling Whitebeard's last rather erratic journal entry. The whole event must've been very traumatizing for everyone involved.

"Okay, so what do we do?" Kidd asked with a frustrated huff, "You said he's 'waking up'... does that mean it'll happen soon?" Marco hummed low in his throat.

"Most likely. I suggest we send a platoon out to his resting place and at least see what we're dealing with, yoi. Having Pops back would be...wonderful." Sabo was struck by how relieved and nostalgic Marco sounded when he talked his sire. They all seemed to believe that the old pureblood was the answer to all their problems. He glanced back to Kidd and noted his furrowed brow. His old friend clearly wasn't sure how to take this new development...especially because Whitebeard coming back would probably mean giving up the title of Lord.

"We can't afford to send a whole platoon." Kidd stated firmly, "Honestly, we barely have enough men to finish the repairs and all the other crap we have to do before the Council comes for us."

"Then I will go, yoi." Marco shot back, struggling to his feet, "Stefan can accompany me." The other commanders quickly voiced their disapproval of the plan.

"Absolutely not! You're *hurt*, brother."

"Yes, and besides...we need you here."

It was true. Marco knew the citadel inside and out. He would be instrumental in getting everything back up and running as they worked to prepare for possible assaults in the future. Sabo pressed his lips together and glanced back out the window. With the hole Ace made still not fully repaired, he could see out into the wastes with no issue.

He couldn't help but wonder how Ace and Luffy were doing...

"Then who would you suggest?" Marco questioned gruffly, "Law? Thatch? Injured or not, I am the obvious choice, yoi."

Sabo surprised himself by raising his hand.

"...I could go." The room went silent at his statement and Kidd's eyes grew wide.

"What!? No! I need you here just as much as I need Marco."

"Actually, you don't." Sabo swiftly replied, stepping forward as he spoke, "Killer and the others will have no problem covering my duties for a few days."

"...'Bo, you're my friend and I respect you, but you have almost no experience in the wastes. Pureblood or not, I'm worried you'll die."

"Wha-" He started, somewhat offended, "I won't *die*! I'm perfectly capable of crossing the wastes." Besides, if Ace and Luffy of all people could do it...so could he!

The vampires all glanced between each other, considering his offer. Kidd was clearly against it, but Sabo knew he was right. His responsibilities could easily be covered and weren't as important for the wartime efforts. Eventually, Kidd turned back to him with a scowl on his face.

"...all right, fine. You can go."

"Wonderful!" Sabo replied before sending them a sheepish smile, "Uh...so...where am I going, exactly?"

"The Elder Catacombs." Marco informed him, "They're about a week's drive from here." As he spoke, Law placed a holographic device on the table and pressed a button that brought up a map of the area.

"The Catacombs are located here." Law explained, pointing to an empty space of land far removed from the local territories, "Before the Fall, it was purposefully placed on an island to make it easier to protect and more difficult to reach. Now though, with all the oceans dried up, you can just drive there. Still, I recommend you take weapons with you. Even after so long, the sentinels stationed there have not lost their vigilance."

Sabo gulped but focused on memorizing the map.

"Don't worry, you shouldn't need them so long as you present something to validate your claim to our citadel, yoi." Marco added, motioning to the large dog lounging nearby, "Stefan should be more than enough but I'll give you my seal just in case."

"S-So they might attack me?"

"Maybe." Thatch said with a shrug, "You gotta understand, there's lots of elders buried there. The guards are stationed to keep unsavory characters from reviving someone that is better off dead."

Sabo nodded and Law turned off the projection. He needed to get some new clothes, a good storage of blood for the road...stop by the armory-

"Don't worry, Sabo-ya." The doctor soothed, placing a hand on his shoulder, "We'll make sure you're as prepared as possible."

---

Luffy smiled behind his scarf and goggles as the hot, arid wind hit him in the face, almost blowing his hood back. It'd been a long time since he'd *truly* felt the freedom of the wastes. No matter how nasty it was...it was big, open, and familiar. No cages or chains in sight.

Ace's arm tightened around his belly as he leaned to turn his bike, taking them around the remains of some ancient building. Luffy had to admit, he hadn't expected Ace of all people to be the one who liberated him from the citadel, especially considering he was the one who kidnapped him in the first place.

Not that Luffy was complaining. Freedom was freedom.

'I just hope Zoro and the others don't try to break in...' He thought, smile falling slightly, 'I need to let them know I'm okay somehow.'

The brothers rode for a while until evidence of a sandstorm kicked up in the distance. Ace quickly turned and headed for an old structure so they could take shelter. When the bike came to a halt, Luffy jumped off but stumbled when pain shot up his spine, the seal jarred by his sudden leap.

"You okay?" Ace asked as he steadied him, prompting Luffy to nod.

"Yeah, sorry...I'm still a little unsteady." Stupid seal.

"No worries, Lu." Ace replied before helping him into the more protected area of the broken structure. Once Luffy was settled, the vampire pushed his bike inside and brought tarps out of

his bag. The boy blinked in surprise when his brother expertly set it up in such a way that would block most of the sand from outside.

He'd always assumed that vampires weren't as knowledgeable of the wastes because they didn't live there...but clearly he was wrong.

"My time as a scout is finally paying off." The vampire said while adjusting the tarp, "This isn't my first sandstorm." Luffy grinned and pulled down his scarf.

"Shishishi, I can tell. Ne, do you have any food?"

"Yeah, give me a second."

A few minutes later, the two brothers sat next to each other eating while the wind howled outside of their make-shift shelter. Luffy greatly enjoyed the 'packaged meal' Ace had brought for him, heated over the fire. Meanwhile, the vampire dug his teeth into a bag of blood, draining it to about halfway.

"What is this called again?" Luffy asked, holding up the small, warm little bowl of deliciousness.

"Mac-n-Cheese, I think." Ace answered, "It's something Thatch really likes from the old days..." Luffy gazed sorrowfully at his brother when the vampire trailed off, his countenance falling. He was still clearly shaken by the sudden revelation of his past and, even though he was trying to hate the Whitebeards...they'd been together for so long.

It was hard.

"It's really good." Luffy whispered while scooting closer to his brother so he could rest against his shoulder. He wasn't really sure what Ace needed so he decided to try and just let him know that he wasn't alone. "Almost as good as fluffy cakes."

"Really? That's high praise, coming from you." Ace answered, looking down at him in amusement. Luffy grinned and took another bite, humming as the cheesy goodness melted in his mouth.

They sat in silence for a while, the only sound that of the sand slamming against their shelter. When they finished their meals, Ace huffed and leaned his head back.

"Sorry to drag you into all this Lu...I-I can't believe I-" Luffy stopped him with a swift jab to the side with his metal arm.

"Don't apologize. What happened, happened, and now we're here. Besides, if you hadn't kidnapped me...I probably wouldn't know you existed."

"Y-You have a point." Ace managed, holding his side tightly, "Damn Lu...that really hurt." Luffy blinked and looked at his metal arm in surprise. He hadn't hit him that hard...had he?

Deciding to just go with it, Luffy stood up and placed his hands on hips, a cheeky smirk appearing on his face.

"Shishishi, that's because I'm super strong now! Come at me if you dare!"

Ace stared at him for a second before returning his smirk.

"Oh? You dare challenge your big brother?" Luffy laughed and trotted across to the far side of their shelter when Ace stood up, "Come 'ere you little brat!" As expected, despite his best efforts, Ace caught him quickly and subjected him to a horrible barrage of tickles that had him laughing until he cried.

"Y-You just wait..." Luffy muttered once Ace finally released him, "I'll beat you someday."

"You're welcome to try, but I am older than you...and a vampire."

"Then I'll be strong when I'm your age!"

"I'm technically thirty-six, Lu. It'll take you a while to catch up." Luffy chuckled and slumped against Ace with a breathy sigh of contentment.

"...old man." He got a playful bonk to the head for that comment but he didn't mind. It felt surprisingly natural to interact with Ace like he was his big brother. Back at the citadel, he'd felt trapped and unsure...so he hadn't trusted Ace (or anyone, really) completely, especially after everything he'd done. But now that he was free and back in familiar territory, Luffy felt like he could truly let go and give him his trust.

'I need to give him a chance.' He thought, eyelids falling as exhaustion caught up to him. Ace had changed since they first met...and Luffy knew it was for the better.

---

Ace sat stock still when Luffy made himself comfortable against his side, almost sliding down into his lap. The boy he knew had only just started being okay around him...and now he just-

The vampire barely held in a yelp when Luffy mumbled something in his drowsy state and snuggled further into him, prompting Ace to put a steadying arm around the slight boy's shoulders. Once Luffy started to snore quietly, Ace felt himself relax a little.

Who knew coming out into the wastes would have such a profound impact on his brother? He was being *playful* and relaxed and...being the Luffy he'd only seen glimpses of while in the citadel.

'I'm sorry for taking this from you...' Ace thought while looking at his little brother's sleeping face fondly. Though Luffy was looking at the positives of their time together, he knew that he didn't deserve the boy's forgiveness, not after everything he did to him.

Honestly, Ace was a terrible person and a part of him didn't want to dirty the innocent teen with his bloodstained hands. Because of him, Rouge and Dragon were left defenseless and Luffy was kidnapped. It was his selfishness that took his little brother's freedom and no amount of atonement could fix everything. Luffy's arm...the trauma...it was a miracle his brother would even *speak* to him.



"...stop movin'..." Luffy muttered, startling Ace out of his thoughts, "...makes it hard ta' sleep."

"Sorry, Lu." He whispered back, taking a moment to scratch at the boy's scalp, drawing out a content whine from the sleepy human.

"Gotta learn ta' be a good pillow..." Luffy managed, eyelids fluttering closed again, "...first lesson of the wastes..." Ace chuckled softly at the nonsensical statement and simply leaned back, allowing Luffy to be more comfortable. He instinctively continued to scratch his fingers into his brother's raven locks, lulling the kid into a deeper sleep.

Right then and there, Ace decided that he would protect Luffy...no matter what. Even if the boy eventually came to his senses and decided he hated him (which would be completely understandable), he'd make sure he was safe.

Because that was what he could do to atone.

---

Ace took them through the wastes following his 'memories of home' and Luffy's not very helpful directions. Unfortunately, all the sand tended to look the same and neither of them had clear memories of how to find the place.

"Um...I think it's that way." Luffy said, pointing East while Ace pulled up a map on his bike, "I remember it was surrounded by what my Dad called 'trenches'."

"Right, I remember that." Ace replied, tapping on the screen to zoom in, "Actually, Lu...if the trenches are what I think they are, we should go South." As much as he trusted his brother, Luffy had only lived in that house as a young child and had been unconscious when he left. If his memories could be trusted, they needed to go to where the ocean once was and find the 'island' their parents had turned into a home.

"Okay, let's go!" Luffy chirped while pulling himself back onto the bike. Ace smiled at his excitement and pulled the boy's hood up before peeling out. He gradually changed their direction, avoiding sand pits where he could. Thankfully, his bike was made for the wastes so it wouldn't be stopped easily.

That is, except by Luffy's insistent whining.

"Ace~" The boy all but *whimpered*, "Please, can we stop? I'm thirsty!"

"You just drank like a whole bottle!" Ace replied with a huff, grateful for the half mask that stopped sand from getting into his mouth as he spoke, "I'm sorry but we only have a limited supply of water and I can't let you have any more."

"Then let's get some more!" Luffy exclaimed, pointing at what looked like...nothing, "Pull over!"

Ace wasn't sure what the boy had seen but stopped the bike anyway. Luffy leapt off and winced but didn't slow down as he approached an old rock formation. He pushed the bike

behind the rambunctious teenager, curious what he'd seen. While he turned on their ride's camouflage mode, Luffy gently ran his hands over the smooth surface of the boulder, like he was looking for something.

"Uh...what're you doing?"

"I'm looking for a marker." Luffy answered (like that somehow explained everything), "I noticed one earlier which means there's a watering hole nearby!"

Ace had heard of watering holes, of course. They were hidden sources of water and sometimes food that humans guarded fiercely. The Whitebeards knew of the location of only one within their territory but suspected there were others.

"Here." Luffy said quietly as his gloved hand wiped sand away to reveal a symbol carved into the stone. Ace leaned in closer and recognized it as an arrow. "This way! It's not far."

The vampire followed Luffy through a literal maze of abandoned vehicles, buildings, and whatever else humans could carve symbols into, amazed the boy could understand (or interpret) the meaning of often ridiculous 'markers'. While the one Luffy originally pointed out was easy enough to understand, how were they supposed to know that a smiley face meant 'death that way' or a circle meant they had to backtrack and then head West.

Luffy claimed some 'nice people' taught it to him but still...

Human code was weird as hell. No wonder vampires had such a hard time finding them. The only reason the Whitebeards found one was because Thatch had accidentally fallen into it during one of their training missions. As a fledgling, Ace had just laughed as his 'mentor' flailed around in the underground pool of water like a fool.

'No! Stop thinking about them.' He thought, forcing down a smile. They're the enemy...not his people.

"We're here." Luffy whispered, peeking around a metal beam into a very well-hidden cave entrance. Ace could smell humans inside but didn't see any guards. "Keep your hood up and don't let anyone see your eyes."

"Easy enough."

"Oh, and don't do anything, uh, vampire-ish." Luffy added, making Ace raise an eyebrow.

"Like what, exactly?"

"I don't know, hiss or something!" Ace chuckled at his brother's pouty face.

"Okay, I won't hiss at anybody. We good?"

Luffy nodded and led the way towards the entrance, pushing his hood back the second they were out of the wind. Ace looked around and pulled up his half-mask when the scent of humans increased. He had to admit, it felt a little weird to just waltz into a human 'sanctuary', but Luffy seemed to know what he was doing.

As they walked down the slopes of the cave, they followed more markers until eventually they emerged in a large open area lit by lanterns. Ace's first impression of the watering hole was that it was quite pleasant. The pool of water looked clean (for the wastes, anyway) and the air was much cooler underground.

There was a good amount of humans enjoying the water, most of which looked like travelers. He saw a few people that had booths and obviously lived there, but watering holes clearly weren't popular places to settle down.

Without a word, Luffy walked up to the water and plopped down to dig one of their many water jugs out of the bag. Ace decided to stand at his back so he could see everything (and everyone), just in case. He didn't feel particularly threatened by anyone, they were just humans after all, but you couldn't be too careful.

One old man in particular hadn't stopped staring at them from the moment they entered the cave. Ace eyed him as stealthily as he could, resisting the urge to hiss. Instead, he placed a hand on Luffy's shoulder possessively, letting the human know that if he messed with his baby brother...he'd be in for a very one-sided fight.

"Something wrong?" Luffy asked quietly, finishing up with the first bottle.

"Everything's fine, Lu. Keep going."

By the time his little brother had finished, the old man was on his feet and approached them bravely, prompting Ace to tighten his grip on Luffy. If he wanted a fight-

"Luffy? Is that you?" He asked, his silver hair cascading down his shoulders. The boy blinked up at the man for a few seconds before breaking out into a wide smile.

"Rayleigh! It's been so long!" The old man grinned at Luffy when he broke free of Ace and hugged him (much to Ace's annoyance).

"Yes, it has. You've really grown up."

"Mn!" Luffy affirmed, grinning widely, "I have so much to tell you."

"I bet. Come...let's go to my quarters."

Ace reluctantly followed the pair when Luffy began to tug him along, unsure how he felt about the old man. He seemed to know the boy though...maybe they'd crossed paths when he was younger?

After turning a few corners, Rayleigh led them inside a carved out portion of the cave, definitely man-made. It was...cozy, Ace supposed, and though sparsely decorated, it gave off a homey feel. A female human sat in a chair facing the door, drinking something that smelled suspiciously like alcohol.

"Oh, Lu-Lu! Welcome back." The woman greeted, easily accepting a flying hug from Luffy.

"Hi Miss Shakky! It's good to see you again!"

"How do you know these people?" Ace asked, curiosity finally getting the better of him. Luffy turned away from the female to smile brightly at him.

"Rayleigh and Shakky took me in after Katakuri dropped me off here when I was a kid. They taught me everything I know."

'This is *that* watering hole?' Ace thought, blinking in surprise. Who knew.

"Would you or your friend like something to drink?" Rayleigh asked, turning towards the clay 'kitchen'.

"Yes, please!" Luffy chirped, "Oh, and this is Ace, he's not my friend...he's my brother!" The two humans looked surprised at that but turned their smiles to him nonetheless.

"I see. Well, it's a pleasure to meet any family of Luffy."

"Likewise." Ace muttered, sitting down at their insistence. While Luffy flitted around Shakky in the kitchen, he found himself sitting across from Rayleigh in rather awkward silence. He didn't dare take a drink from the mug they'd given him because that would involve pulling his mask down.

"Ace, right?" Rayleigh asked, prompting him to nod, "...or rather, Gol D. Ace." The vampire immediately went stock still, eyes widening.

"How do you-""

"I was a friend of your father, Roger." Rayleigh quickly answered, stopping him from elongating his claws, "I recognized you the second you walked into the cave, mask or no mask. You have his eyes."

Ace frowned at the man and slowly reached up to pull the mask down. Luffy looked over at him with big eyes when he flipped his hood back, eyes flashing red.

"...you were turned, huh?" Rayleigh put in casually, taking a sip from his own drink, "I heard about your disappearance, but feared the worst. Rogue was worried."

Ace said nothing for a few moments while Luffy gathered his cup in his hands and joined him on the rickety couch. The boy looked a little worried and glanced between them cautiously.

"How did you know my parents?" He finally asked, appraising the human before him.

"Roger and I were childhood friends." Rayleigh explained, "Believe it or not, we fought vampires together in our youth, but he disbanded our hunter group when he decided to marry Rogue. Wanted to settle down."

"Funny, he never mentioned you." Ace replied while placing his cup aside so he could lean forward over his knees.

"A-Ace, they're good people." Luffy quietly said while tugging on his sleeve, "You can trust them."

"It's all right, Luffy." Rayleigh put in, waving the boy off, "His suspicions are warranted. Shaky, would you bring over that picture?"

"Sure thing, Ray." The woman replied, moving over to a locked trunk in the corner. Ace watched her closely as she opened it, dug around for a moment, and pulled out a photograph that looked old. "This the one?"

"Yeah, thank you." Rayleigh answered before holding the picture out to Ace, "Here, take a look at this."

Ace frowned as he took it but gasped softly the second he recognized the faces on the photo. It was his parents, Roger and Rogue, smiling along with the human couple before them. They looked happy and were posing outside of what he recognized as his childhood home. Rogue's belly was swollen with pregnancy.

Luffy peeked over his shoulder and his lip trembled with emotion.

"I-It's Mom."

"Yeah...and my Dad." Ace whispered, running the pad of his thumb over Roger's face, "I guess you really did know them. What was he like when he was young?"

"Where to start..." Rayleigh answered with a far off look, "He was a great man."

They ended up lounging in the small cave-home until that evening, just listening to stories about Roger and Rogue. After about three hours, Luffy turned Ace's lap into a pillow, but he listened with aft attention, loving every tale that came out of Rayleigh's mouth.

"It sounds like you two had a lot of adventures together." Ace whispered, trying not to wake his brother.

"We did, but he wanted nothing more than to create a safe place for his family to thrive in." Rayleigh continued, "I'm sorry to hear about their deaths...these are troubling times we live in."

"I-If I had just *been* there..." Ace hissed, newly recalled memories coming to the front of his mind. Unfortunately, there wasn't anything he could have done to save Roger, but he could have saved Rogue. "The Whitebeards took everything from me."

"They're the ones who turned you?" Ace nodded.

"They turned me against my will and stole my memories...so I took Lu and ran." He explained, placing a hand on Luffy's mop of hair as he spoke, "We're going to go to his home and visit Rogue's grave. Dragon's as well...that's Luffy's Dad."

Rayleigh hummed in thought.

"Hmmm...yes, I know Luffy's story, but to be honest, even if you *had* been there, I don't think you would've made a difference." He held up a hand to silence Ace's protest. "Listen to me for a second. Though Dragon preferred his solitude, he was one of the strongest D's alive. Whoever attacked their home was a very powerful vampire that not even a seasoned Denali could best. Frankly, Ace, you probably would've died with them."

Ace grit his teeth in frustration.

"I-I just...I'm so *mad* at myself. I wasn't even there for Lu's birth and-"

"But you're here now." Rayleigh interrupted with a knowing stare, "I can tell that Luffy trusts you and that you are making an effort to reconcile your relationship. Don't live in the past... look to the future. That's how Roger lived and it would suit you well."

He nodded, feeling the human's words deep in his soul. It would still take time for him to overcome his guilt...but he'd do his best to live without regrets from then on.

For Luffy.

---

They ended up staying with the watering hole 'community' for a few days. Ace had wanted to head out sooner rather than later, but Luffy had *so much* to tell Rayleigh and Shakky that one day simply wasn't enough. To their credit, they dutifully listened to his rambling even when he got sidetracked by something.

Ace found himself listening as well, curious what the boy thought about his time at the citadel.

"-and then, I got a *metal arm*, and beat Ace up! It was fun!"

"...sounds like it." Rayleigh answered in an amused tone while Ace just huffed. He'd never live that down.

While Luffy continued, Ace's eyes moved over to Shakky. The woman had pulled him aside the day before to ask about his little brother's well-being. He'd been honest with her about what happened at the citadel, which brought a tinge of sorrow to her eyes.

*"That poor boy has been through so much...I hope he never has to be someone's captive again."*

'Yeah, you and me both, lady.' Ace thought, reaching out to snack on some sort of weird chips the couple set out for them eat. Luffy's mental (and physical) health was already a hot mess they were desperately trying to put back together. Thankfully, giving him his freedom had been a big step and his true personality was already shining like the sun.

Ace stopped midway between grabbing another bite when loud voices carried through the cave. He frowned while Luffy went silent, tilting his head as he listened.

"What's going on?"

"I'm not sure." Rayleigh admitted, standing to his feet, "Most likely a rowdy traveler. I'll go check it out."

"We'll come to!" Luffy chirped as he stood, bouncing on his heels. Ace huffed but followed the young boy's lead. As they walked down the carved out hallway, he tugged his mask and hood back up.

When they reached the main cavern, they saw what could only be described as a disturbing sight. An older, somewhat plump human was cackling devilishly as he kept a small child from getting to the water. The other humans around just watched, wary of the weapons the man's subordinates carried.

"That's right, brat!" The man screeched, grating on Ace's sensitive ears, "No one drinks before Orochi-sama!"

"Who?" Ace whispered to Luffy who frowned.

"Dunno, never heard of him."

"I have, unfortunately." Rayleigh put in, crossing his arms, "He's your traditional sycophant who delivers other humans to his vampire Lord in order to gain money, comfort, and other things. Calling him a slimy piece of trash would be a bit too kind in my opinion."

"Which Lord?" Ace asked quietly, barely withholding a hiss when the human kicked the little one in the chest.

"Kaido, I believe."

He hummed at that. Kaido's influence didn't extend out this far but he supposed having a human do his dirty work under the noses of the local Lords was a surprisingly smart (if not dishonorable) strategy.

"Get lost!" The fat human bellowed, causing the child (who he identified as a little girl) to retreat with a frightened cry. Surprisingly, she looked up at Ace under a layer of intense muck and, barely holding in her tears, she threw herself around his leg. The vampire looked down at the filthy thing, not really sure why she was clinging to *him* of all people. "Let that be a lesson to all of you!"

Ace scowled behind his mask as the disgusting excuse for a human laughed. Too often he forgot how different humans could be...some were innocent angels like Luffy, while others just took up perfectly good oxygen.

"Y-You'll get it now, stupid head!" The cry suddenly exclaimed, drawing attention to herself and Ace by proxy, "My Daddy will get you good!"

Ace's mouth dropped open in shock.

...Daddy!?

"Oi, you this whelp's Father?" Orochi asked, prompting some of his subordinates to point their weapons at him.

"Uh..." Ace managed, glancing to Luffy who just shrugged.

"Yeah, and he's super strong!" The girl put in helpfully before sticking her tongue out at the man, "You'd better leave before you get beat up." Ace sighed, which really seemed to really tick Orochi off, and soon his men were stalking towards them, clearly aggressive.

"Oh...I have plans for you, brat." Orochi sneered, making the girl hide again, "No one crosses me and gets away with it. I'm sure Kaido would *love* to have both you and your 'Daddy' as snacks."

Ace had to chuckle at that. What a fool.

"You think this is funny!?"

"Yeah, actually." He answered while reaching down to pluck the light (and very filthy) girl off the ground and place her in Luffy's arms, "It's hilarious that you think you can beat me."

At that, Orochi ordered his men to attack and Ace rushed forward to meet them. He tried to keep his strength in check so he wouldn't accidentally kill them but did accidentally snap one of their arms. Oops. When another came at him with a rifle, Ace swept the floor with his leg, sending him crashing down.

These guys were too easy.

All too soon, Orochi was the only one left and he crawled away from him like the sniveling weasel he was. Ace swiftly caught up to him and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him close.

"Get out of here...and don't come back." Ace whispered, making his captive tremble in fright, "Oh, and I suggest you change hunting grounds. This place is under Whitebeard's protection." Orochi whimpered when he let the human see his red eyes for a split second, just so he understood that he was serious.

Luffy cheered for him when Orochi ran off, still holding onto the dirty girl. The other humans meanwhile simply swarmed into the pool, grateful they could finally have a drink.

"That was awesome, Ace!"

"Thanks, Lu..." He muttered before turning his attention to the little girl, "Hey, what's the big idea, huh? It's not very nice to make bad guys fight a stranger." She blinked at him.

"But...you're not a stranger. You're my savior!"

"Your...what?" Ace echoed, now severely confused. The girl pouted and fisted a hand into Luffy's shirt.

"I-I was hungry and tried to sneak into a vampire camp, but you stopped me..."



Ace's eyes widened when he realized who the little girl was. Though now a lot dirtier and thinner, this was the little one he'd rescued during the two week scouting mission. She'd traveled a long way for someone so weak and small. He was startled out of his thoughts when the girl shoved her little hand at him.

"I'm Tama. My friend Komachiyo is around here somewhere too...but it's nice to meet you, Mister Vam-" Luffy quickly silenced her with a hand over her mouth, smiling sheepishly. Beside him, Rayleigh chuckled lightheartedly.

"Why don't you two find Miss Tama's friend and get her cleaned up. I'll deal with Orochi's leftovers."

---

A few minutes after the incident, Luffy was gently cleaning Tama off in a basin of heated water. Shakky had pulled the curtain closed to give them some privacy and for some reason, Ace hadn't wanted to help. He closed one eye when the girl splashed water on him, grateful he'd removed his shirt before attempting to bathe her.

He'd suspected trying to get a dog and a person clean at the same time could be messy.

As it turned out, 'Komachiyo' was a blonde-furred canine who was just a pup himself. He was just as filthy as Tama so Ace had thrown him in the bath as soon as he found him before leaving them with Luffy.

"Um...is Mr. Ace mad?" Tama asked meekly while Luffy scrubbed a particularly difficult patch of mud from her arm with a cloth.

"Nah, I think he just thinks it's weird that you like him so much, shishishi." He replied, laughing when Komachiyo leaned forward to lick his face, "He's not used to people liking him."

"Why?"

"Cause he's a vampire I guess." Luffy answered with a shrug, "Now come on, Shakky pulled out some clothes that should fit you."

Once she was all clean and clothed, Luffy walked with Tama back to Rayleigh's home, her hand clasped in his. The little girl looked much better and had her hair pulled up into a bun. Komachiyo walked next to her, sniffing as they went. Upon entering the space, Rayleigh and Shakky greeted them while Ace just sat on the couch, face exposed since everyone there knew his identity.

"She's all clean!" Luffy announced, making Tama blush and shuffle nervously under the attention. With a grin, he scooped the little girl up, carried her over to Ace, and held her out. "Now it's your turn to hold her, Ace."

"Wha-" He tried, taking the girl around her middle at his insistence, "Lu, I d-don't know how to-"

Luffy just grinned and plopped down on the ground not far from them, leaning on his hand. His brother looked so...nervous. His arms were locked tight, like he was afraid of dropping her. Luffy huffed and mimicked how he should hold Tama with a nearby, bunched-up blanket. Ace quickly copied him and lowered the girl onto his lap.

She seemed to like that and wasted no time snuggling up to his chest, making the vampire go still.

"It's okay, Mr. Ace...I don't break easy."

---

Ace sat as still as he possibly could while Tama dozed in his lap (having fallen asleep after Luffy spent an hour showing the girl his picture books), honestly unsure what to do. Getting used to having Luffy around was one thing, but this human was *so tiny*. What if he hurt her or did something else that was equally as terrible? Like...like scaring her or something.

Luffy, the unhelpful kid, just gave him a thumbs up. Did that mean he was doing a good job?

"She likes you." He whispered, petting the dog that he currently had in his own lap.

"No idea why..." Ace answered in an unsure voice, "All I did was stop her from entering the camp. I wasn't even that gentle, Lu!"

"You still saved her." Luffy said while scratching Komachiyo behind the ears, making his tail thump against the ground, "That's probably the first time anyone has ever been nice to her. Kindness is hard to come by in the wastes."

Ace frowned at the distant look on Luffy's face. The kid was probably thinking back to all his own hardships. Though he'd eventually received help from kind people...most of his life was spent enduring unspeakable pain and loneliness.

"You should get some rest...we'll leave tomorrow morning."

Luffy nodded and placed Komachiyo up on the couch before crawling up himself so he could settle next to Ace. The vampire huffed when the boy made himself comfortable against his side. With Luffy on his right, Tama in his lap, and the dog on his left...he really was just an overgrown pillow, wasn't he?

Ace gently repositioned Luffy so his cold metal arm wasn't pressed up against his skin. It was a magnificent piece of machinery but he wished more than anything that he didn't need it.

"You should think about re-locating soon." Ace informed Rayleigh when he re-entered the room, making him raise an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"A war's coming." He continued, choosing to ignore the soft snores coming from the beings around him, "The Council is coming for the Moby Dick and I know for a fact that their Lord intends to clear this whole area out before that. If you don't want to be captured...I suggest you leave."

"I appreciate the warning." Rayleigh replied before sitting down in a chair across from him with an amused chuckle, "Never thought I'd see the day...a vampire cuddling with human children and a puppy. Adorable."

Ace felt his face heat up at that and he looked away, too embarrassed to meet the human's gaze.

"You need to take this seriously! Vampires are no joke, old man!"

"Says the fledgling with the human brother and a *daughter*."

"She's not my kid!" Ace quickly shot back, "It's hard enough getting used to having a little brother..." Rayleigh just laughed.

"I'm just messing with you, Ace. Thank you for letting us know about the upcoming battle... we will spread the word for other watering holes and sanctuaries to be on alert."

A few minutes later, the old couple freed Ace from Tama's snoring form along with the dog, taking them to the back room where a 'proper bed' awaited. Soon, it was just Ace and Luffy, the boy still dead asleep against him. Just as Ace was about to fall asleep himself, Luffy began to tremble and mumble to himself.

"N-No...don't touch me..." The vampire was immediately on alert when Luffy brow furrowed and he instinctively curled in closer to him, "Please stop, I-I don't wanna-"

"Luffy, wake up!" He hissed, shaking the boy, "You're having a nightmare."

Ace felt a deep sorrow bubble up inside him when Luffy continued to whimper, tears forming in the corner of his eyes.

"No, no, no, no...STOP IT!" Luffy suddenly screeched in a broken voice, waking up with a jolt. Ace quickly gathered him in his arms and shushed him, forcing the boy's head into his shoulder in a selfish attempt to avoid looking at his bloodshot, wide eyes. It just made his guilt worse.

"Shhh...it's okay, Lu. You're okay."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I-I'm sorry..." Luffy mumbled almost incoherently as he cried into Ace's shoulder, "I'm sorry I'm so weak."

"You're *not* weak." Ace quickly replied while massaging the skin behind Luffy's ear in an attempt to soothe him, "Lu...you're one of the strongest people I know."

"R-Really?" The boy asked with a sniffle. Ace nodded.

"Without a doubt."

At that, Luffy gave him a shaky attempt at a smile before snuffling back into Ace's shoulder and falling back asleep. He gently laid a hand on his brother's head before exhaling in

multiple uneven breathes. Luffy deserved better than him...deserved a better *life*, one free from nightmares and lingering memories.

---

"But I wanna come!" Tama whined, pouting up at Ace. The vampire sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Listen, kid, the wastes are dangerous enough for the two of us. I'm not bringing you or the dog along. Rayleigh and Shakky said they'll take care of you."

The girl looked down sadly but Ace knew it was for the best. Tama was so tiny and vulnerable...frankly, it was a miracle she'd survived so long without a group to protect her. Not far from him, Luffy watched the interaction with a soft smile. The boy had recovered surprisingly quickly from his intense nightmare, which told Ace he had them pretty regularly.

"Don't worry, she'll be safe with us." Rayleigh put in, ruffling Tama's hair.

"Thank you." Ace said, inclining his head to the human, "Come on, Lu, it's time to go."

"Okay." The boy answered, padding forward to hug the couple tightly, "I'm glad I got to see you guys again. Take care!"

"You to, Lu-Lu." Shakky muttered into Luffy's hair, kissing it chastely, "Be careful out there."

A few minutes later, Ace and Luffy were back out in the wastes heading towards where his bike was camouflaged. The vampire glanced over to the boy when he remained quiet for more than two seconds, noting the somewhat downcast look on his face.

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah...I just hope they'll all be all right." Luffy muttered as he trudged through the sand, "...you know, with the war coming and all."

"They'll be fine." Ace reassured, reaching over to pull the teen's hood further down over his face so it was protected from the sun, "Rayleigh seems like a strong guy."

"W-Will we be okay?" The boy asked shakily, prompting Ace to stop and place a hand on Luffy's metal arm.

"Everything will work out, Lu...I promise."

Luffy's mood significantly improved when they got back onto the bike and started riding again. It was clear that the human enjoyed feeling the wind against him, which brought a smile to Ace's face. He looked up when they approached 'the trenches' which was all that was left of the ocean of old.

From what he knew, the drop-off used to be very steep and it was filled to the brim with water, but now it was just like driving into a valley filled with sand. The years hadn't been kind to the area and now *the deep* wasn't all that deep anymore. Their destination was located

on one of the 'islands' out there...but he wasn't sure which one. They'd just have to go until they saw something he recognized.

"Ace, what's that!?" Luffy called over the wind, pointing at what looked like a dark lump in the sand just on the edge of the trenches. Ace frowned and slowed the bike to a crawl as they got closer.

Before he could stop him, Luffy jumped off and jogged over the suspicious lump, squatting down on his heels next to it. Ace just sighed and stopped the bike completely.

"Well, what is it?"

"Um...I think it's a body."

Ace huffed at that while Luffy flipped the body over. It wasn't terribly uncommon to come across corpses in the wastes. It would be best to just bury it and move on-

"Ah!" Luffy exclaimed, drawing Ace's attention immediately, "I-It's-"

The vampire swiftly rushed over, worried it was someone Luffy knew. He'd lost enough already and burying a friend was always hard. However, when he got a good look at the 'body', Ace's eyes widened in surprise.

"-it's Sabo." Luffy finished, brushing sand from the pureblood's face.

"I...can see that." Ace answered before joining his brother in sand and pulling the other vampire completely out of the sand.

"Is...um...is he dead?"

"No, he's just unconscious." He quickly answered, picking up that Luffy was worried, "What the hell is he doing all the way out here?"

Suddenly a loud bark startled both of them, causing them to turn around.

"Stefan?" Ace muttered as he looked over the massive dog, its tail wagging lazily. Luffy immediately held out his arms and the dog rushed him, slathering his face in friendly licks.

"Shishishi, good boy!"

'Okay, now I'm really confused.' Ace thought while systematically checking Sabo for wounds. Stefan never left the citadel and they wouldn't let one of their purebloods leave unattended, especially in a time of war. Thankfully, Sabo coughed in that moment, spitting up a superfluous amount of sand and almost choking.

Ace quickly moved the pureblood so he was on his side.

"Welcome back." He said, finally earning Sabo's attention.

"A-Ace? Why're you...what happened?"

"We found you in the sand!" Luffy chirped, face beaming from all the licks he'd received, "Are you okay?"

"Luffy..." Sabo managed as he sat up, holding his head as he did so, "I'm fine...I think."

"What're you doing here?" Ace asked, suspicious about the pureblood's sudden appearance so close to their destination. Sabo met his gaze firmly and continued to brush sand from his trousers.

"I'm on a mission, but you don't have to worry...it doesn't have anything to do with you."

"So what, you were attacked or something?"

Sabo blushed at that and scratched his cheek sheepishly.

"...yeah, something like that." Ace's eyes immediately went to his empty satchel where equally empty blood packages were located. He saw some good tools but they looked brand new and like they hadn't been used. Also of note was that there was no vehicle in sight. Surely he hadn't come on foot...

"You have no idea how to survive in the wastes, do you?"

"I-I...I do! I *did*!" Sabo shot back while crossing his arms, "I just wasn't expecting...I-I mean-"

At this point, Luffy joined them with Stefan at his side, gazing down at Sabo with those big eyes of his. Under the human's concerned stare, the pureblood drooped, sighing deeply.

"...no, no I don't. My vehicle just stopped working yesterday so I got out and walked but then I got dizzy and...well, I guess I passed out."

"Probably heat stroke." Luffy said, clearly surprising Sabo with his knowledge, "If you're on foot, you shouldn't travel for more than an hour at a time without the proper gear."

"Noted." Sabo replied, clearly embarrassed. Ace just chuckled and pulled down his mask.

"Wow, just think, if we hadn't come along-"

"Just *rub it in*, jerk." Sabo muttered indignantly, puffing out his sunburned cheeks and leaning on his hand, "And besides, I'm sure I would've been perfectly fine without you."

"Yeah? Who's gonna help you then...Stefan?" At his name, the dog barked happily.

"..." Sabo didn't have anything to say to that.

"Ne, can he come with us?" Luffy asked, making Ace's amused smile fall, "I-I mean he'll probably die if we leave him, right?" Sabo twiddled his thumbs at that, face flushing even more.

The last thing Ace wanted was to let Sabo come with them. He left the citadel to distance them from the Whitebeards and, even though the pureblood was new, he was still one of them. Still, Ace also couldn't say no to Luffy's 'puppy-dog eyes'.

"I guess...but he rides in the side-car."

"That's very kind of you," Sabo replied while Ace just rolled his eyes and moved to his bike so he could press the appropriate buttons that brought out the additional seat, "but are we even going in the same direction?"

"That depends on where you're headed."

"The Elder Catacombs." Sabo said, making Ace stop what he was doing, "Not long after you two left...something happened and-"

*"Whitebeard."* Ace whispered breathily, eyes wide in shock. Marco had often told him about his sire, the great pureblood who'd built the Moby Dick. "He's waking up."

"H-How did you know?" Sabo questioned while Luffy helped him to his feet.

"That's the only reason Marco would send you there." Luffy seemed confused by their conversation and just looked between them while running his gloved fingers through Stefan's soft fur. "You're lucky...it's not far from where we're going."

Sabo frowned at that while Ace's excitement grew.

What better way to take revenge than to confront the very pureblood who was responsible for it all?

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! So sorry for the long wait on his chapter, I was dealing with some serious writer's block :( I do hope that all of you are doing well and staying safe out there! ENJOY!

As they drove into the trenches, both Ace and Sabo were eerily silent so Luffy and Stefan did all the talking. Despite the fast speeds they were traveling at, he often reached over to pet the fluffy dog and tell him how cute he was...which seemed to amuse Ace but not Sabo.

Probably because Luffy had to reach across him to get to the dog they'd haphazardly stuffed in the sidecar with Sabo.

"Surely you have two sidecars." Sabo said loudly over the wind, leaning away in disgust when Stefan began to lick his face aggressively. Ace just chuckled under his scarf.

"Sorry, Blondie, I've just got the one. Don't you like animals?"

"I-I do...but not when they're very much in my personal space." Sabo replied, drawing a giggle from Luffy. It was kind of fun to see the ever respectable pureblood so out of his element. "Aren't we there yet?"

"We're getting close." Ace replied, eyeing the horizon, "Let me know if you see anything familiar, Lu."

"I will!" He answered while adjusting his goggles so he could see a little better. Unfortunately, pretty much all of the sand dunes looked the same and there didn't seem to be many structures around besides old machine wrecks. However, after about ten more minutes of riding, Luffy tugged on Ace's sleeve and pointed out an old, partially hidden sign.

Ace immediately turned towards it, slowing down so they could check it out.

When they came to a stop, Luffy jumped out off the bike and rushed up to it, carefully brushing a layer of sand off the front so they could read what it said.

"What's it say?" Luffy asked, bouncing in place excitedly as Ace knelt down and scanned the slightly decayed words. At least...he was pretty sure they were words.

"It says, 'Welcome to Dawn Island'." Luffy's eyes lit up at the familiar name while Ace sent him a knowing grin. "We're close, Lu. The house has got to be somewhere around here."



Without giving Sabo a chance to squeeze out of the sidecar, they bounded back to the bike and headed past the sign, determined to find the building they were looking for. As they rode, they passed a few demolished buildings, but none seemed familiar. Eventually, they came to a particularly tall dune, forcing Ace to ride around it.

When they emerged on the other side, Luffy gasped.

There, looking a little worse for wear but so *familiar*, was what could only be his childhood home. Everything looked like he remembered and he couldn't help the excitement from bubbling up inside.

"Is...is this it?" Sabo asked, eyeing the structure carefully, "I'm surprised it's still standing."

"Not everyone can live in citadels." Ace replied, making the pureblood clamp his jaw shut. Luffy wasted no time leaping off the bike and trotting forward with Stefan at his side, scanning the decaying building with bright eyes. Memories of his Mom and Dad playing games with him and laughing at his antics came to the front of his mind, bringing a soft smile to his face.

That is, until he saw evidence of the attack.

Luffy's smile fell as he walked towards the broken window, eyeing the claw marks on the sill. Even after so many years...

He jumped when Ace put a hand on his shoulder.

"You okay, Lu?"

"I-I...I'm not sure." Luffy admitted, eyes glued to the claw marks. Soon all the good memories were eclipsed by ones of *that day* and his knees began to shake. That vampire showing up out of nowhere...attacking his parents, seeing their bodies-

Ace quickly turned him around and hugged him to his chest, keeping him from looking at the old building with a hand on his nape. Luffy sniffled against his brother's shirt, trying to keep the tears from falling.

"Sorry...I-I...sorry."

"It's okay, Luffy." Ace soothed, speaking in an uncharacteristically soft voice, "It's not your fault. Listen, why don't you stay out here with Stefan while Sabo and I look inside." He found himself nodding and allowed his brother to lead him back to the bike where he settled down in the warm sand. Stefan quickly laid down next to him and placed his head in his lap.

Though he was excited to see his old home...there were just too many bad memories associated with it. Maybe it was for the best that he stayed outside.

---

Sabo resisted the urge to go over to the clearly upset Luffy and comfort him. He wasn't sure what would be appropriate given his role in keeping the human in captivity for so long. So he

stood a ways off and let Ace take care of it. The other vampire was surprisingly soft with the boy and soothed him with gentle words.

He pressed his lips together as he watched the brothers interact and looked away, towards the house that had caused Luffy so much distress. Though, in reality, it wasn't the building's fault...it was whatever had happened here. All he knew was what Ace had yelled to Marco during his angry tirade. A vampire had attacked and killed his parents...using poor, young Luffy as a blood slave.

What Sabo couldn't understand was where a vampire powerful enough to kill two Denali and abduct their son had come from. This place wasn't all that close to any major citadels and, given Ace's power, he assumed their parents were quite skilled themselves. Maybe a rogue had stumbled across their little home and attacked on a whim?

'Or perhaps the attack was planned...' Sabo mused, taking in the damage to the home, 'If they knew about Luffy's blood, it would make sense.'

"You coming?" Ace asked when he stepped in front of him, towards the front door. The pureblood glanced backwards at Luffy before answering. The boy seemed upset, but okay. He was currently petting Stefan's head methodically while wiping at his moist eyes.

"Yeah."

Getting inside the building wasn't too difficult given the age of the home, but they did release quite a bit of dust in the air upon disturbing the long dormant place. Sabo coughed but stepped inside the home after Ace, eyes trying to take in everything at once. It wasn't too impressive but he supposed it was appropriate for a small human family.

Remnants of furniture could be seen around what used to be the living room, but one of the couches were broken like someone had been thrown into it. Sabo walked by the walls, examining the old knitted work decorating them. It was, he supposed...homey.

"It...it hasn't changed much." Ace muttered from his left where he was examining what was clearly supposed to be a kitchen. The other vampire then picked up shattered picture frame and smiled thinly. "Feels like ages since I was last here."

"I do believe it *has* been ages." Sabo replied while walking around the intact couch towards a hallway that he assumed led to a bedroom. However, he stopped when he saw what was on the floor. Face scrunching up in pain for sweet Luffy, he knelt down in front of the bones that had once been the boy's parent. Ancient blood stains littered the carpet around the bones, letting him know that they hadn't died a peaceful death.

Ace's breath caught behind him when he joined Sabo.

"God, he told me what happened b-but-" Ace trailed off and fell to the floor next to Sabo, dropping the picture frame on the carpet. The fiery vampire reached for the bones with a shaky hand, but stopped, unable to bring himself to touch them. "C-Can you tell me if it's male or female?"

Sabo's gaze fell to the floor.

"It's a woman I believe."

"*Mom.*" Ace all but sobbed, placing a hand over his mouth. The intense grief the vampire felt was almost tangible as he cried, emotion pouring out from every part of his body. Sabo wasn't sure what to do but decided to place a hand on Ace's shoulder.

This whole time, he'd thought about Luffy and his sorrow...but this was Ace's parent too.

While Ace pulled himself together and looked for something to gather up his Mother's bones in, Sabo continued to search the home. He made sure to look for anything that might be significant to the brothers, but there wasn't much left after years of corrosion. In the bedroom, he did find an interesting hidden compartment beneath the floor but it was empty.

When he walked back into the living room, something occurred to Sabo. While most of the items were in various stages of decay, there were spaces where things were simply *gone*. Perhaps the attacker had taken more than just Luffy...or maybe the home had fallen victim to raiders? It was difficult to tell.

"Have you found Dragon yet?" Ace asked in a quiet voice as he cradled a bag that held what was left of his Mother close to his chest. Sabo shook his head.

"No...not yet. Perhaps he fell outside?"

Ace sighed.

"Maybe, but then recovering him might just be impossible."

Sabo's expression softened at Ace's expression. Though he was trying to be strong, he was obviously just as affected by this place as Luffy.

"Don't give up. We'll find him." Sabo answered, trying to encourage Ace. They'd come all this way for the purpose of burying their parents and he intended to support them as best he could. Even though he and Ace had their differences, Sabo recognized that this was important and, frankly, he needed the help.

Stefan was actually the one who located Luffy's father in the dunes outside the home. Unfortunately, there wasn't much left...just a few scattered bones, but they had to assume it was him. Luffy started to sob when they began gathering the remains so Sabo pulled him close like Ace did, trying to comfort him.

By the time they finished building two graves and burying the remains, the moon was high in the sky and the wastes were chilly. Ace chose the spot, a shaded area just behind the house, and Sabo etched the names into the boulders using a knife.

*Rouge.*

*Dragon.*

Both the brothers requested that he leave off the 'D'. No one else needed to know who lived there.

Between Sabo and Ace, Luffy stood with a thistle plant clutched in his hands. He'd finally stopped crying once the graves were complete but his eyes were still puffy and red. Without saying a word, he walked towards the graves and gently placed a piece of thistle on both of them reverently.

"Sorry it took so long to give you a proper b-burial." Luffy managed, reaching out to caress Rouge's stone, "I just want you to know that Ace and I are okay...and-and...I miss you." Sabo stood at a distance, watching in silence as they mourned the loss of their family members. At his feet, Stefan whined with tail limp.

"It's terrible, isn't it." He whispered to the dog, "All this time, I've seen humans as less than us...but they have families, mourn their dead...I feel like a horrible person Stefan."

The dog just looked up at him and tilted his head.

Sabo sighed.

"Sorry, I know you're just a dog...didn't mean to dump my emotional insecurities on you."

---

Later that evening, Sabo took Stefan back to the bike, leaving Ace alone with Luffy. They sat quietly for a while, just staring at the graves they'd created. The moon above them was full and shone a beautiful light on the meager stones that now served as a marker of life for two important people. The night air was chilly so Luffy had long since scooted over and leaned into Ace despite the fact that he was a vampire and was naturally cold-blooded.

The boy didn't seem to care.

Ace glanced down at his little brother, concerned at how quiet he was being.

"How are you holding up?"

"...okay, I guess." Luffy replied, voice broken from how many tears he'd shed over the past few hours, "I-I just wish I could've done something...back then."

"You were a *child*." Ace emphasized, squeezing the boy's shoulders, "There was nothing you could do." Of course, he felt the same way. The amount of thoughts he'd had that started with 'if only' were staggering.

"I know," Luffy said with a sniffle, "it's just hard to accept."

With that, the two returned to a comfortable silence for a few minutes, just thinking. Ace found his thoughts wandering to the future while he was certain Luffy was thinking of the past. What would he do if he came face-to-face with *Whitebeard*? Was it really a good idea to go with Sabo to the Catacombs? Even traveling with Luffy, his desire for revenge hadn't waned and he was fairly certain the pureblood would try to stop him if he attacked the Elder. Even beyond that, what was his plan for the future?

Continue to travel with Luffy...? But what if he wanted to live with his own kind...

Everything was so uncertain.

"What're you thinking about?" Luffy asked innocently, looking up at him with those big, round eyes. Ace bit his lip at the question and turned back to the graves in front of them.

"After we do this thing with Sabo...what do you want to do?"

"Want to do?" The human echoed, frowning slightly, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you want to go find those human friends of yours? Live with them..." Ace swallowed hard at the thought of having to leave Luffy. He wasn't sure he was ready for that. The boy snuggled up to him just smiled and placed his head on Ace's shoulder.

"I want to let them know I'm okay, definitely, but I also want to stay with you for a while. Everything else we can figure out later."

"You...mean that?"

"Mn." Luffy affirmed, yawning under his breath, "Cause you're my big brother 'n stuff and I wanna get to know you better...y'know, out here. Where we're *free*." While Ace gaped down at the boy, he fell asleep, snoring softly on his shoulder.

Ace couldn't help but chuckle to himself at the kid's innocent response and pull him closer. He hoped they could have *this* for at least a little while longer. There was still so much he didn't know about Luffy and he desperately wanted to get to know him too.

'Don't worry, Mom...Dragon.' Ace thought when his eyes went back to the graves, 'I'll look after him.'

---

Sanji woke up early, like he preferred, and made his way to the kitchen (his favorite place in the Moby Dick). The cooks all greeted him kindly, which was a refreshing change from Germa. His Father hated it when Sanji tried to cook, saying that it wasn't proper for a pureblood. Not here though. Even Thatch, one of the Commanders, could be found in the kitchen most days.

"Good morning!" Thatch greeted, flashing him a smile as he cooked what looked like an omelet, "You wanna help us out again today?"

"Yes, if that's okay." Sanji answered while rolling up his sleeves. The commander just laughed at that.

"Sure it is! You don't have to ask every time ya know."

'Habit.' Sanji thought as he donned an apron. The Moby Dick was so different from Germa that it was taking some getting used to. Everyone generally seemed to like each other and the humans were well taken care of. He was very happy he decided to bring Cosette here where she had a chance at life.

Sanji had checked up on her after the 'D' Ace attacked and was pleased to see she was fine. In fact, she already seemed healthier and more at ease after being in the Moby for just a few hours. Showed just how much a good environment could affect your health.

"I heard we're having another big meeting today."

"Yep..." Thatch answered, flipping up his omelet with incredible skill, "Kidd said he heard from his Dad that the Council is going to decide what to do about us today. Depending on how many side against us, we'll have to start making preparations beyond what we're already doing."

"What would that entail?" Sanji questioned, curious how the Whitebeards would handle the upcoming war. His family would start producing chemical weapons and gather their war machines together.

"First, regardless of how the Council responds, we need to clear the city." Thatch continued, "If the humans stay there, they'll be caught right in the middle of this mess. Law is already making space in the back of the citadel for more arrivals and we've talked about using Kidd's machine to expand beyond the walls if we need to."

Sanji hummed at that. He wasn't sure exactly how many humans called that ancient ruin their home, but it had to be a lot. Capturing them all would be an enormous undertaking, especially given the time limit.

"Second, we'll need to gather our forces and those of our allies. I bet some of the Council members will side with us and hopefully they'll be willing to donate their forces." Thatch stopped speaking for a moment to plate the omelet, garnishing it with herbs. "Third...well, we're going to need more blood than usual on hand, so we'll have to harvest more from the humans than usual. It's going to be hard of them and I hope they'll forgive us for it."

Sanji was surprised at the sorrow in the Commander's voice. He actually seemed concerned about the humans...

"I didn't used to care...but little Luffy and Ace reminded me that we were all once humans to." The other vampire added with a huff, "I mean, not you and the other purebloods obviously, but the rest of us weren't always vampires. I know that everything we do is to protect them, but what if there's a better way to do things?"

Sanji wasn't sure how to respond and simply shrugged. He had grown up in this system and had no idea how to change it. That being said, it was nice to hear someone else sympathizing with humans. He'd always felt more loved by them than his own family and did hope to free them someday.

Once he was finished in the kitchen and breakfast was prepared for the citadel, Sanji took a walk around the courtyard. The sun had only just risen and its rays shimmered on the water located in pockets around the citadel. It really was a beautiful place and so free of graveyards. Sanji glanced at one of the two stables near him, noting that some of the humans were awake and enjoying the nature just like him.

It was peaceful, but the occasional bits of sand that made it over the wall brought him back to reality. Eustass Kidd had the right idea. Why did they have to keep their beauty to themselves when they could restore the whole world? Hopefully the machine would work and maybe someday, Sanji would be able to see this kind of greenery in the wastes as well.

With that mental picture in his head, Sanji leapt up to the top of the wall. He was immediately hit in the face by hot air, which was unpleasant but it didn't stop him from imagining what it could look like. Right now, it was a vast desert, but they had technology that could change that.

He stayed up there for a few minutes until the heat and arid sand became almost unbearable. However, just before he returned to the coolness of the inner citadel, something caught his eye.

Something...*green*.

It was a flash in his peripheral vision, but he was certain it had been green. Sanji frowned and stared at the dune in question, but nothing moved. Was it just his imagination?

---

Zoro's heart raced as he ducked behind the dune, barely escaping detection from the vampire on the wall. He'd timed his approach with the guard rotations, but then one had appeared out of nowhere, almost spotting him. Thankfully, his beige cloak gave him protection not only against the elements, but also prying vampire eyes.

Nami and Usopp had been against his return to the citadel, saying there had to be another *safer* way to rescue Luffy, but Zoro went anyway. They'd essentially left the teen to take all of their punishments on himself and there was no telling if he was still safe in there or not.

He glanced over the dune again. The wall of the citadel had a conveniently large hole in it that had yet to be fully repaired. Zoro wondered how that happened but praised whoever was listening for the convenient entry point. He could slip inside when no one was around, find Luffy, and make good on his promise.

Admittedly, it wasn't a great plan, but he couldn't wait any longer to go for Luffy. He'd been a prisoner for long enough. But just before he made his approach, someone cleared their throat right behind him. Zoro whirled around with sword drawn, eyes wide at the sudden appearance of a blonde vampire.

He was wearing a suit of all things and sat with his legs crossed, looking both bored and interested at the same time. Zoro's gaze flicked to the wall. Had he jumped all the way from there!?

"Yo." The vampire greeted, surprisingly cordial for a blood-sucking monster, "I wouldn't recommend sneaking in there right now. They're on high alert for pretty much anything." Zoro grit his teeth and held the blade higher, but the vampire only gave it a passing glance.

"Leave or you'll regret it." He growled, hoping the blonde couldn't hear his heartbeat pounding in his chest. He'd promised Nami, Usopp, and the others that he'd be careful...not

get caught. Was this vampire going to turn him in?

"Nice hair." The vampire suddenly put in, motioning towards the green under his hood, "I mistook you for a stray bush from the wall."

"Wha...a bush!?" Zoro shot back, suddenly offended, "Well your eyebrow looks like a pinwheel!" The vampire blinked at him and chuckled slightly, as if amused by his come-back.

"You're funny, human. So tell me, what're you doing sneaking around the Moby Dick?"

Zoro went silent even as the vampire pulled out a cigarette from his suit pocket and lit it right in front of him. Who was this guy? He didn't remember seeing him around the citadel the last time he was there...maybe he was new? If the Whitebeards were recruiting, that was bad news. Their organization had a hard time dealing with the members they already had.

"None of your business."

"Seeing as I caught you, it kind of is." The vampire shot back, "Look, I could just drag you inside and find out later, but I'd rather we talked out here." Zoro gulped when the blonde puffed out a circle of smoke, eyeing him carefully.

He was right. Zoro wasn't a match for him (as much as he hated to admit it). He wasn't a match for *any* vampire as he was now.

"Why would I tell you when you're going to capture me anyway."

"I'm not, honest." The vampire retorted, "That is, unless you're planning something unsavory."

"I...I'm here to rescue my friend."

The blonde hummed in surprise.

"Really? Who?"

"His name is Luffy."

The vampire seemed surprised at the name and immediately took another drag from his cigarette. Zoro just watched the man closely, body tense in case he changed his mind and decided to attack despite his assurance that he wouldn't. Did he know Luffy?

"Hate to tell you, but your friend isn't here anymore." Zoro's eyes opened wide at that statement and he leaned forward towards the vampire in shock.

"W-What do you mean?"

"His brother took him into the wastes just days ago." The blonde continued, adding to Zoro's confusion. Luffy had a brother? "No idea where they are now."



Zoro felt his arm go limp, causing his sword to touch the sand at their feet. So...Luffy was free? Someone else had helped him? A part of him was frustrated with himself for taking so long but at least his friend wasn't a prisoner anymore. Still, something about the blonde's explanation bothered him.

"I didn't know Luffy had a brother."

"Neither did he, apparently." The vampire said with a shrug, "But Ace was pretty-"

"Wait, wait...*Ace!*?" Zoro hissed, stomach dropping violently.

"Yeah, his older brother."

Zoro's blood went cold. Ace was the name of that vampire who'd kidnapped Luffy in the first place! His friend wasn't safe...he'd just been passed from one captor to another. They knew for a fact that this 'Ace' was obsessed with Luffy but now he was calling him his *brother!*? Zoro's thoughts swirled inside his head, each bringing with them a worse scenario.

Most likely, Ace had gotten tired of having to share Luffy with the rest of the citadel and decided to take him somewhere more secluded.

"Which direction did they go?" Zoro demanded, putting up his weapons as he prepared to leave. No way was he leaving Luffy in that psycho's hands!

"East, I think." The vampire answered, watching as Zoro stood to his feet and adjusted his cloak, "You're seriously going after them on foot? You'll die."

"Who said I was on foot?" Zoro muttered as he rushed back to where he'd hidden the jeep Nami had stolen for him from the garage. He could feel the vampire following him but he didn't dare stop. Luffy was in more danger than ever and, worst of all, he wasn't sure where he was.

'I'll just have to wing it and hope I get lucky.' Zoro determined as he uncovered the vehicle and hopped inside. The vampire walked up to the driver's side with hands in his pockets.

"You going to stop me?"

"No." The vampire quickly replied, looking over the car, "I can see you're determined to do this and I can respect that. Hope you find your friend, bush-head."

"It's Zoro." He quickly shot back, not liking the nickname. Zoro was surprised to see the vampire's eyes widen at his name, almost in shock. Weird reaction. "Now leave me alone, curly-brow!"

---

Sanji could only watch the human drive away as he tried to process the name. Zoro. He'd heard it over and over from his closest human friend, Kuina.

"Zoro, who's that?"

*"My brother!" Kuina chirped, smiling despite the beating she'd received only a few minutes before. Sanji was trying to distract her from the pain by asking her questions about herself. "He's kind of an idiot but he's a determined, loyal idiot. I hope he's okay and hasn't been caught..."*

Sanji swallowed hard. He couldn't believe he had just had a conversation with Kuina's brother and hadn't realized it! It made sense in retrospect...the swords, the strange colored hair (that he was positive Kuina had mentioned at some point). How had he not noticed?

Shaking his head to re-focus, Sanji dug into his pocket for a particularly helpful piece of technology: a scout-bug. He swiftly activated it and sent it to land on the jeep's bumper.

He'd already lost Kuina...Sanji would be damned if he let anything happen to her brother.

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! I hope you're all doing well and are staying safe out there :) We have a good amount of fluff in this chapter (since the last one was pretty depressing) as well as set-up for Chapter 30 which is another big milestone for this story! Thanks so much for your continued support and I hope you enjoy the chapter~

The next day, Ace, Sabo, and Luffy piled into the bike again and took off towards their next destination: the Elder Catacombs. Sabo was once again stuffed in the sidecar with Stefan but his thoughts were swirling a bit too much to care. Marco and the others had told him about the tomb, of course, but he was still unsure what to expect.

Despite being a pureblood, he didn't have much experience with the whole process of hibernation.

'Okay, I have Marco's seal...the dog...' Sabo thought, mentally going through everything they would need to enter the catacombs safely. The last thing he wanted was to clash with the sentinels posted there.

"We should be able to see it soon!" Ace yelled over the wind, motioning with his head towards a large dune. Sabo nodded and strained his neck in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the building in question. Earlier that day, he'd asked Ace how he knew where the catacombs were and the other vampire simply said that Marco was a thorough teacher (through gritted teeth).

It saddened Sabo to see how conflicted and angry Ace was with the Whitebeards but, unfortunately, it was warranted.

"Wow..." Luffy said in awe, eyes sparkling behind his goggles, "Is that it?"

Sabo's mouth dropped open at the sheer size of the structure before them, revealed once they rode over the top of the large sand mound. It almost looked like an old church with a steeple and elegant, gothic architecture, but it was *much* larger...easily bigger than the average citadel. A stained glass window that had once depicted a beautiful scene above the main entrance was now broken, allowing the hot air of the wastes inside the tomb.

The three travelers remained silent as they approached the building, too amazed to say anything. Instead, they chose to gape, each taking in the magnificent sight in their own way. When they came to a stop not far from the front entrance, Stefan leapt out of the side care and padded up to the door, tail wagging.

"Well, we're here." Ace stated while moving his scarf down from where it usually rested around his nose to protect his face, "What's the plan?"

"We go inside, I suppose." Sabo answered, pulling out the seal Marco had given him. It was old, like one used to seal a letter in wax, and had Whitebeard's sigil on it. "I was told to present this and Stefan to the sentinels so that we could enter safely."

"Sentinels?" Luffy asked, tilting his head to the side in confusion, "What're those?"

"They guard this place...I guess." Sabo replied with a huff, "I really don't know. Marco didn't tell me what they look like." Ace hummed at that and approached the door, catching up with Stefan.

"I'm sure we'll run into them eventually. Come on, let's see what the inside looks like." Luffy let out an excited squeak and rushed forward to join his brother, making Sabo smile. It was nice to see the boy happy and not grieving. Maybe a good adventure into an ancient tomb was just what he needed.

Luffy tugged experimentally on the door handle but it didn't move. He pouted up at Ace who cracked his knuckles and approached the metal monstrosity. However, despite pushing on it with all his might, it budged only a few inches. Pocketing Marco's seal, Sabo stepped up beside Ace and joined him in attempting to open the door. With both of their strength, it slowly creaked open, blasting them in the face with stale, hot air.

The little human trotted inside, swirling around as he tried to take in everything at once. The entrance to the tomb looked like an abandoned church with torches, pews, and even an altar, but what concerned Sabo was the lack of any 'sentinels'...where were they?

"Wow, this place is awesome!" Luffy exclaimed, his voice echoing throughout the chamber, "It's so pretty and *old*."

"Yeah...it's something." Ace echoed, walking along the rows of pews and running his hand over the wooden benches, "...but where're the catacombs?"

Sabo wondered that himself, so he began to walk along the edge of the room. Many of the windows were broken and tapestries torn, but the torches were still lit which told him that someone had been there recently. Given the wastes' atmosphere, they would have to be re-lit regularly. He stopped in his tracks when his foot hit something metal.

"Uh, guys? I think I found a sentinel." Ace and Luffy rushed over and gaped down at the metal beast Sabo had kicked. It was clunky in design with plated steel and a head that looked like an air conditioner grate, but something told Sabo it was stronger than it looked. Not just anything could be trusted to guard hibernating vampires.

But this one...it was in pieces on the floor, like it had been torn apart.

"Are they supposed to be like this?"

"I...I don't think so." Sabo answered, lowering his voice as he knelt down beside it, "Something or *someone* must've destroyed it." While he examined the metal beast, Ace stepped past it and pushed aside a torn tapestry, revealing a stone passageway that led beneath the sanctuary. "It's safe to assume we aren't alone here."

---

Luffy walked down the stone staircase, squished in between Ace and Sabo. His brother demanded that he be the one to walk in front with the torch while the pureblood guarded the rear. Both the vampires were on guard after finding the metal man destroyed but Luffy was just excited to be going on an adventure.

He took in everything with big eyes, fingers nestled in Stefan's soft fur. The dog seemed alert just like Ace and Sabo but his tail hadn't stopped wagging since they entered the catacombs. When the winding staircase finally came to an end, they were deposited into a large, curved stone tunnel that was also lined with torches.

"Incredible..." Sabo whispered, trotting up to ancient writing on the wall, "There's no telling what kind of secrets this place holds."

"Don't forget why we're here." Ace chided, making the pureblood scowl, "Let's just find Whitebeard and get out of here."

"What, so you can attack him?"

Luffy huffed when the two growled at each other and took a few steps into the wide corridor. It really was like a long tunnel...would they get lost? Spinning around to take it all in, Luffy stepped on a loose brick. He froze when a loud *click* echoed through the space, drawing the vampires' attention.

"Um...I stepped on something." Luffy informed them with a smile, "Think it might be a bobby trap."

"That's *booby* trap, Luffy." Ace corrected while slowly approaching him, "Don't move, okay? There's no telling what it might-"

The vampire tensed when another noise broke the silence and barely caught an arrow when it was inches from his face. In the next second, a barrage of arrows hurtled towards them from small holes in the wall, prompting Ace and Sabo to rush for Luffy and throw him to the floor. Thanks to their quick actions, no one got hit.

"Shishishi, wow that was cool!" Luffy laughed, earning him a disgruntled look from Ace, "Think there are any more?"

"I certainly hope not." Sabo said with a sigh while dusting off his clothes, "Who the hell puts booby traps in a tomb?"

"...lots of people, actually." Ace replied incredulously, "The question is, why are they active?"

"Maybe because we technically didn't get permission to enter from the sentinel on guard..." Sabo mused, stroking his chin, "Or maybe whoever beat us here put the catacombs on high alert. Either way, we need to be more careful-"

Luffy wasn't really paying attention to what the pureblood was saying and skipped forward to examine one of the arrowheads, stepping on three more loose bricks in the process.

*Click, click...click.*

Ace groaned while Luffy just laughed.

---

Ace loved his little brother, he really did, but Luffy was a massive trouble magnet. The kid seemed to have the special ability to activate every single trap in the entire tomb...and then laugh it off. It was only thanks to he and Sabo's good reflexes that no one had gotten hurt yet.

"Shishishi, this is so much fun!" Luffy exclaimed happily as they ran from a giant rock that was rolling towards them, intending to squish them into the stone floor. Ace sighed and plucked the kid off his feet so they could jump over a hole much too wide for any human to scale.

"I'm glad you're having fun, but I swear I will carry you the rest of the way if you don't stop *touching things!*"

"Eh, but why?"

"Because we don't want to die!" Sabo put in before screeching when another rock tumbled towards them from another direction, "RUN!"

Ace skid to a halt and turned around to sprint in the opposite direction with Sabo and the dog at his side. Luffy just laughed his head off, having a blast. They really needed to get off this track and find Whitebeard before his precious baby brother got them killed. Eyes scanning the space ahead of them, Ace increased his speed and kicked a hole in the thankfully flimsy wall, creating an escape route.

They slipped through just in time to watch the rock roll past them.

"Let's go again!"

"NO!" Ace and Sabo stated loudly at the same time, making Luffy pout.

"Aw..." The freckled vampire huffed at the sadness on the boy's face and ruffled his hair.

"Sorry, Lu, but right now we need to focus. You good, Blondie?" Not far from them, Sabo had his hands on his knees and was breathing hard. Ace chuckled when the pureblood held up a finger, indicating he needed a break. "What, can't handle a little cardio?"

"Do me a favor and shut it, please." Sabo shot back between breathes, "I almost died in the desert and now I'm running on empty...I-I'm not at my best." Ah, that's right. The pureblood probably hadn't had any blood recently. Makes sense.

"You want some of mine?" Luffy offered sweetly, making Sabo's head jerk up.

"U-Uh, no that's okay. I'll be fine."

Ace knew that Sabo probably *did* want some but seeing as they were currently in a tomb surrounded by thirsty elder vampires, it wasn't a good idea to let them get a whiff of blood, even if Luffy's that didn't smell particularly appetizing. They could unintentionally revive vampires who needed to stay asleep.

While Sabo caught his breath, Ace examined their surroundings. They'd traveled pretty far from the entrance (mostly using unseen passages thanks to Luffy's shenanigans) and now were deep into the catacombs. There were small, unassuming tombs here that probably belonged to lesser vampires, but hopefully they were getting close to where Whitebeard was laid to rest.

Ace just hoped that whoever was down here with them wouldn't get in their way.

"All right, I'm ready." Sabo said while straightening up, "Let's keep going."

As if on cue, Stefan barked and started trotting down one of the corridors, leading the way. Seeing as they had no map or anything else to guide them, the brothers (plus Sabo) followed the furry dog. He *was* connected to Whitebeard, so maybe he had some sort of instinctive way of knowing where his master was?

When they emerged into a much larger and more elaborate section of the catacombs, Ace latched onto Luffy's arm, keeping him from rushing some poor soul's casket. It was clear they'd arrived at an area meant for more prestigious vampires, which meant they were getting close.

"Which way, boy?" Sabo asked, causing Stefan to motion down the hall with his nose, "Guess we're going that way."

"Ace, *Ace*. Look, that statue has a cool spiky weapon!"

"...a mace, Lu."

"Yeah! I wanna touch it."

"Nope, not doing that."

He all but dragged Luffy down the stone corridor, keeping him from activating any more traps or hurting himself. It was great that his brother was having a good time but there were dangerous things and creatures around that shouldn't be disturbed. They stopped short when Stefan suddenly crouched down and began to growl. Immediately on alert, Ace scanned the area ahead of them for threats.

*"I-Intruders...intruders detected..."*

Sabo leapt backwards with a yelp when two active sentinels dropped from the ceiling without warning, both armed with metal spears. Luffy made a sound of amazement from behind Ace

as he looked the guards over. Admittedly, Ace thought they were cool too but seeing as they probably intended to attack them...

"Wait, wait, please let us explain!" Sabo swiftly put in, pulling out Marco's seal to show the robots, "We're here to see Whitebeard and have permission to-

*"Must...d-destroy..."*

Sabo sidestepped when one slashed down with its spear, damaging the floor.

"I think something's wrong with them!" The pureblood called back to them, "They aren't listening to me."

"Yeah, I noticed." Ace replied, cracking his knuckles, "Luffy, stay back...we'll handle this." Thankfully, the boy nodded in agreement and whistled for Stefan. The dog barked and rushed right over, out of harm's way.

Without waiting for Sabo, Ace rushed the one on the right. He leapt into the air and caught it on the head with a harsh kick, sending it to the ground. His heart swelled when he noticed that Luffy was cheering for him.

Of course, Sabo chose that very moment to sweep the other sentinel's feet out from under him, earning him a few cheers of his own. They glared at each other for a moment before focusing back on the task at hand. Both vampires were now very determined to destroy the sentinels blocking their path as *flashily* as possible.

Sabo was agile, he'd give him that, and jumped onto his sentinel while it was down. Without wasting time, the pureblood crushed its head with his fingers before tearing it completely off, all while catching a haphazard attack by the sentinel with his other hand. Ace couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the ridiculous finger strength Sabo had, but he refused to be outdone!

Dodging another spear thrust, Ace moved to punch the metal monstrosity right in the chest. However, when he connected, he was surprised when the sentinel just straight up *exploded*. Shocked, Ace watched it fall to the ground smoking and on fire. It was only then that he noticed *he* was on fire and started to pat at his shoulder instinctively in an attempt to put it out.

Oh wait...right. That was his 'power'.

"Ace that was sooo cool!" Luffy exclaimed, trotting up to him with a big grin, "You're on fire!"

"...literally." Sabo added while tossing the sentinel head behind him. If Ace wasn't so focused on trying to make the fire go away, he would've taken the time to gloat that he won their little improvised contest. "Have you tried blowing it out?"

"Like a candle!" Luffy said with a laugh, making Ace scowl huff.

Of course he couldn't just 'blow it out'...idiots. Thankfully, after a few minutes of waiting, the fire vanished from his shoulders and fist, returning to his body. It would certainly take some



getting used to, but if he could re-learn how to use it-

"Anyway...I guess we should keep going. I bet we're not far now."

Ace rolled his eyes when Sabo voiced that they should move on. He was just annoyed that Luffy thought he was cooler than him.

The three moved on, stepping over the destroyed sentinels as they walked. True to Sabo's prediction, they entered a large cavern that seemed empty, but when Stefan began to go nuts, they knew they were in the right place. The dog barked and practically skipped up to a grate in the floor, one that was much larger than any they'd seen so far.

Ace walked up to it and peered between the metal, eyes widening at the sight of a long spiral staircase.

"Is...is this it?"

Stefan whined and sat on the grate, tail thumping loudly.

"Great. Uh, how do we open it?"

"That's a good question..." Sabo muttered while looking around the room, "Surely there's a lever or something-"

"Ne, ne, isn't this his symbol?" Luffy questioned, running his metal hand over the familiar sigil that was subtly engraved upon the grate. Ace bit the inside of his lip and looked away, unwilling to face the cacophony of feelings inside him. He had to stay focused...they were his enemy. However, before he could tug Luffy away from the gut-wrenching symbol, a spine-chilling laugh echoed throughout the chamber.

"Zehahaha...what a surprise to find you here..."

The vampires whirled around while Luffy shakily stood to his feet, face paling. A cloaked figure stood by the entrance where they'd just been, a sickly smile on his face. Ace could tell that he was a vampire but something wasn't quite right...he smelled strange.

"Y-You're..." Luffy was physically trembling now, eyes wide with fear. Ace instinctively moved closer to his brother. He seemed to know this unknown vampire...

"It's been a long time, little blood bag."

Ace hissed at the man for the horrible comment, fist closing as the stranger approached them with unnerving confidence. He could now see that the cloak hid practically decaying skin. The vampire clearly wasn't in the best health...either that or-

His stomach dropped when he recalled Luffy's description of his captor.

*"I-I think he was using my blood to heal himself, or something. He had lots of scars and wounds that oozed constantly."*

This was the vampire who killed their mother and Dragon...the mysterious being who took Luffy away and traumatized him. Who kept a child in a cage and used him as nothing but a food source.

"You *bastard*." Ace snarled, eyes flashing red, "I'll kill you for what you did!" Beside him, Sabo seemed a bit confused but quickly caught on that this vampire was an enemy. The cloaked stranger just chuckled at his anger.

"And who're you two supposed to be...the brat's current owners?"

"I'm his brother." He spit back, memories of his mom flashing through his mind, "You killed my mother...my sweet mother." The man seemed surprised by his proclamation but recovered quickly.

"Huh, I didn't know Dragon had another child...looks like you've been turned though, pity."

"Dragon was my step-father," Ace clarified, claws elongating, "but that doesn't matter. I'm going to send you to hell where you belong!" Before he could throw himself at the bastard, Sabo stopped him.

"A moment, Ace."

"*Don't* try to stop me-"

"I'll help you if you just give me two seconds." The pureblood hissed, eyes blood red as well, "I'm just as pissed as you are but there are things we need to know first."

Ace reluctantly stepped down while Sabo turned his attention to the cloaked figure.

"Who are you and why are here?"

The man grinned crookedly.

"My name is Teach and I'm here to kill Whitebeard." Ace tensed while Sabo's eyes narrowed. Behind them, Luffy continued to shake. The poor boy was clearly terrified and unable to move even an inch. "Imagine my surprise when I find my panacea in a place like this, served up to me on a silver platter...this trip is turning out to be worth the risk."

"You won't touch him again." Sabo replied with a snarl, "It's *you* who will die here."

Teach laughed darkly.

"We'll see."

---

Luffy couldn't move. The sight of the *monster* (outside of his nightmares) brought out the innermost terror that he'd tried so hard to forget over the years. Suddenly, he was back in that hole, stuffed in a cage, being drained regularly...barely kept alive. His body shook and his knees knocked together.

It was all he could do to stay standing even as Ace and Sabo conversed with the monster.

*Teach*, he said his name was.

"Luffy...*Luffy!*" The boy was startled back to the present when Ace shook him, shielding him from the vampire's view. Luffy whimpered when he looked over his brother's shoulder and saw Sabo clash with the monster, both drawing blood.

It made him think of his parents and almost immediately his stomach churned. It was all *too much*.

"Listen to me, we'll handle that bastard. You take Stefan down there and check on Whitebeard." Luffy was barely listening, big eyes tracking the monster's every move. Would he take him away again? Ace grabbed his cheeks and forced him to look away from Teach. "We won't let him get anywhere near you, okay? Please...trust us. We *will* keep you safe."

He nodded, though he wasn't sure he meant it.

Were they strong enough to protect him? What if they failed...?

Could Luffy protect himself?

"Don't think about him..." Ace ordered, eyes flashing red, "...think about all the fun we had today. You've come so far, Luffy, don't let him drag you back down."

He swallowed the lump in his throat and rested his forehead against Ace's chest as he attempted to tune out the sounds of the vicious fight happening across the room. Their little adventure into the catacombs certainly had been fun, but it was hard to force his feelings down especially when the monster had appeared so suddenly.

"You can do this, Lu."

With one last squeeze, Ace released him and leapt into the fray, shielding Sabo from one of Teach's attacks. Luffy exhaled shakily and turned his attention to the grate. If he could wake an elder vampire up, Teach would definitely be no match for them, right? He tensed when Sabo snarled behind him.

Sabo was a pureblood but the fight wasn't as one-sided as they hoped.

"Okay, I-I can do this." Luffy whispered to himself while Stefan rushed to the nearby wall and pressed his nose against a stone. The grate creaked and opened just enough to reveal the top of the staircase. "Come on, boy...let's go see your master."

# Chapter 30

## Chapter Notes

Welcome to Chapter 30~ Not much to say other than thanks for reading and leaving comments/kudos! They really motivate me to keep writing even when I'm super tired and busy with life :) I hope ya'll enjoy the update!

As Luffy rushed down the stairs with Stefan leading the way, he couldn't help but flinch each time he heard a hiss or growl from the vampires above him. It was a vicious fight and he felt sick to his stomach thinking about the monster Ace and Sabo were holding back.

'No...I need to focus.' Luffy thought, shaking his head violently. His job was to check on Whitebeard...and maybe get his companions some help. The stairs spiraled down further than he expected and by the time they reached the bottom, he could barely hear the fight happening beyond the grate. Torches lit with an eerie blue light illuminated the circular room before him, drawing his eye to a slab of stone in the center.

Stefan whined and pawed at the stone, prompting Luffy to join him at the altar-like coffin. It was *large*, much bigger than he'd expected and expertly crafted. From a distance, he couldn't even see the seam of the heavy lid that covered the vampire's body. Biting his lip, Luffy walked around the stone coffin, running his hand along its smooth edge.

Should he open it?

A screech sounded above him, causing his body to jolt in fear.

Yeah...he needed to open it.

Positioning his flesh and metal hands next to each other, Luffy pushed as hard as he could on the lid, straining as he used all the strength he could muster. Stefan watched him closely, tail wagging when the lid moved ever-so-slightly, dislodging the seal. Luffy yelped and jumped back when a blast of air hit him in the face.

Breathing hard, he tip-toed back to the coffin and began to push again, heart beating quickly in his chest. When the lid was a bit more ajar, Luffy had to stop. He simply wasn't tall enough to keep pushing at the same angle. He'd have to climb up to continue opening the stone casket.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Luffy peered into the coffin before he dared put his feet on the edge. Resting inside was a massive corpse that he assumed was Whitebeard. He looked dried out and *thin*...like one who'd been dead a long time. What really caught his eye was the pristine mustache upon the vampire's face. Why was *that* still intact after all this time?

Luffy was tempted to check for a pulse but he knew that wouldn't do any good. Discounting the fact that vampires didn't *have* a heartbeat, they were put into a death-like state when hibernating. His Dad used to tell him to be careful around certain parts of the wastes because it was possible to accidentally wake a slumbering ancient.

Many had died after stumbling across a buried tomb.

Suddenly nervous, Luffy grit his teeth as he carefully pulled himself up onto the side of the coffin. Shaking, he positioned himself against the edge for leverage and planted his feet on the lid.

'Don't fall in, don't fall in...' He thought over and over as he forced the lid further off its stone pedestal. Luffy gasped when it tumbled off its supports and to the floor, shattering into many small pieces. He scrambled to catch himself but slipped down into the casket, landing none too gently on the vampire's huge chest.

Luffy didn't dare breathe as he stared at the ancient's face, eyes still closed (thankfully). Swallowing hard, he readjusted himself on the dehydrated body, careful not to tear the vampire's thin, decaying skin. He didn't think vampires could be so big...his own body rested comfortably on only a *section* of the ancient's chest. Whitebeard could easily catch him in one of his palms if he so desired. Like a child with his favorite toy.

The ancient was positioned comfortably in the coffin with cushions beneath him and a massive spear-like weapon pointed towards his feet. Luffy gingerly poked at it with one metal finger, amazed at how heavy it looked. Whitebeard's hands grasped it tightly, as if readying for an attack.

He jumped when Stefan joined him in the coffin, easily leaping over the stone edge. Luffy tensed when the dog began to lick his master's face, clearly trying to wake him. He definitely wanted to be out of the casket when the powerful vampire woke up-

Luffy's eyes widened when a scream of pain echoed down towards them.

---

"Ace!" Sabo yelled, rushing Teach to get him away from the dark-haired scout. Their enemy was surprisingly strong considering the state of his body and had managed to bury his nails in Ace's shoulder, deep enough that they could be seen protruding out of his back.

Teach jumped away when Sabo attacked him, prompting Ace to fall to his knees.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-Yeah...this is nothing." The freckled vampire managed, holding a hand against his injury. Flames licked at the blood, as if attempting to heal him. Unfortunately, Sabo was fairly certain that wasn't part of his ability. Given some time and blood, he'd heal quick enough (as all vampires did)...but they didn't have time to rest.

"Ah, that's right...you're a 'D' too, aren't ya?" Teach put in with a dark smirk, "The Council will thank me for killing you."

"Did they send you?" Sabo asked while subtly moving to stand in front of Ace. Though he didn't particularly like the vampire, they were on the same side at the moment. Teach shook his head.

"Of course they didn't. I work alone and for my own interests." The vampire's eyes glanced behind them, to the grate where Luffy and Stefan had disappeared. "As soon as I have what I came for, plus a little *extra*, I'll be on my way."

"I'll die before I let you take him." Ace growled while standing to his feet. His arm was drenched in blood but the vampire didn't seem to care. "Luffy is *free*!" Teach just laughed and elongated his claws.

"That boy will be mine one way or another, little Denali. Killing you two is just the icing on the cake."

Ace snarled and his eyes turned scarlet at that declaration. Sabo called out for him to stop but the furious vampire charged their opponent with ferocious abandon. Without even thinking, he rushed to his side and barely managed to get between Ace and the older vampire's clawed hand.

Sabo lost his breath when it went through his chest.

---

Luffy strained his ears for more sounds but all he could hear were muffled noises from above. He desperately hoped Ace and Sabo were okay. Stefan's worried bark brought him back to reality. Despite covering Whitebeard in many slobbery kisses, the ancient had yet to stir. Why wasn't he waking up? Was there a ritual or something they had to complete?

"Um...M-Mr. Whitebeard?" Luffy called, leaning in towards the vampire's face, "Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

Biting the inside of his cheek, the boy crossed his legs and settled down on the massive ancient's shoulder. What was he supposed to do? Suddenly, Stefan rushed towards him and bit down into his flesh forearm, making Luffy cry out in pain.

"Ow, *ow*, what the hell-" He tried to shake the dog off, but that just made Stefan dig his teeth in deeper. When his blood was flowing like a river, Stefan finally released him and backed up to the giant's opposite shoulder, maw red. Luffy gazed at him with big eyes, unsure why he'd suddenly attacked him...at least until his blood dribbled down onto Whitebeard's sunken cheek.

Oh...maybe that's what Stefan wanted.

"Didn't have to bite me..." He muttered before holding his injured forearm over the vampire's slightly open mouth. The wound bled quite a bit and Luffy managed to hold it in place until the pain became unbearable. He hissed and cradled it to his chest when he simply couldn't hold it anymore.

Whitebeard looked positively ghoulish with the amount of blood covering his mouth and neck but remained still. Expression falling, Luffy held his metal fingers against the bite mark, discouraged.

That is until the vampire swallowed.

Seconds later, Whitebeard's eyes shot open, both molten gold and very much alive. Luffy gasped in fright when the vampire's hand shot out and grabbed him around the waist, holding him tight as he sat up. Stefan barked and danced around, leaving the coffin as soon as his master showed signs of life. Luffy, meanwhile, struggled to breathe.

"Hmmm..." The vampire made a deep humming sound in the back of his throat as he looked Luffy over, moving the heavy spear weapon into his other hand. "A...human?" His voice was coarse, likely from disuse.

"A-Ah...please l-let go-" Luffy managed, black spots appearing in his vision, "You're hurting me!" Whitebeard frowned at him when he spoke but thankfully did loosen his grip, at least enough for him to catch his breath.

"Stefan?" The vampire asked, cracking a smile when the dog spun around in an excited circle, "It is...good to see you...old friend. How long has it been?"

The dog's ears twitched as he sat down.

"Hmmm...quite a while, I believe." Luffy tensed up when the vampire brought him closer to his face, letting his feet dangle. "How did you wake me, human?"

"S-Stefan bit me." Luffy answered, unable to show his wound because his arms were pinned to his sides, "We're helping Sabo and-and there's a m-monster up there and-" Whitebeard's frown softened at his stuttered answer and his fingers loosened even more around his body.

Luffy collapsed to his knees the second Whitebeard put him down on the stone floor. He watched with awe as the massive vampire stood up to his full height and cracked his neck. With every moment that passed, life returned to his dried out body. Even his muscles regained some definition as Luffy's blood coursed through his veins.

"Tell me the situation, little one. Is Marco here?"

"No...no he's not." Luffy answered, feeling incredibly small in the ancient's shadow, "I-I came with Sabo and Ace."

"I do not know them." Whitebeard replied while testing the weight of his weapon, "But if Stefan is with you, that means you must belong to my citadel." Luffy shuddered under the weight of the ancient's presence but gathered enough courage to continue the conversation.

"I don't belong to y-you. Ace freed me."

Whitebeard raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Is that so? And this 'Sabo'?"

"He's a pureblood, S-Second to the Lord of Moby Dick."

This seemed to confuse the ancient vampire.

"Marco took on a Second?"

"No...he's not the Lord." Luffy explained, "Sabo is K-Kidd's Second." Whitebeard closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as if finally understanding the situation.

"I see." Luffy watched carefully as the vampire turned to examine his limbs, opening and closing his hands. "You are a Denali, are you not? One of the Monkey line." He tensed at the quick deduction.

"I...um..."

"You have nothing to fear from me, little one." Whitebeard soothed, wiping Luffy's blood from his mouth, "I have long attempted to protect your kind from the dangers of this world... though I imagine much has happened in my absence."

The vampire scowled up at the grate above them.

"I sense a foul presence...come, let us go meet your companions."

---

Ace stood stock still, too shocked to move. He'd rushed in without thinking and would've been skewered...but Sabo got between them. Now Teach had his hand in the pureblood's chest.

"Sabo!"

"A-Ah..." Sabo managed, spitting up blood, "Don't rush in, idiot. W-We have to do this together!" Ace was just amazed that the other could speak given the fact that Teach's hand was deep in his chest.

Sabo let out a choked scream when Teach did something with his hand, smirk widening.

"Aw, how sweet. You two friends? Perfect." Ace glared at the vampire when he tugged Sabo closer, causing scarlet blood to flow down the vampire's clothes, "Ace was it? You should know I have my hand around your buddy's heart. One move, and he dies."

Ace snarled at him but his body went cold. It was notoriously difficult to kill a vampire, but not impossible. Hit their vital points hard enough and they would fall just like a human. Even though their hearts didn't beat, they were still a vital organ that silently supported them. Crushing it would kill Sabo.

"Let him go!" Ace demanded, meeting Sabo's surprisingly calm gaze with his own. The blonde pureblood was annoying but he definitely didn't want to be the reason he died. Teach smiled almost sweetly, which made him shudder.



"Gladly...but you need to do something for me first. Bring Luffy to me, and your friend goes free." Sabo subtly shook his head but released a shout of pain when Teach moved his fingers slightly. "Tick tock, don't keep me waiting."

Unsure what to do, Ace took a step back towards the grate that led to Whitebeard's tomb. Of course he wasn't going to let Teach have Luffy, but Sabo's life was on the line. As much as he disliked him...he couldn't just sit back and let him die such a brutal death. That just wasn't right. It was at that moment, however, that the sound of heavy footsteps reverberated throughout the catacombs.

Ace turned around slowly as they grew louder, eyes wide. Even Teach seemed slightly uncertain when the head of someone long forgotten emerged.

*Whitebeard*...Marco's sire, the builder of the Moby Dick, and one of the oldest vampires alive. To say he was huge was the understatement of the year. Marco once explained to him how the oldest of them were generally larger than average but this was ridiculous! Ace breathed out a sigh of relief when he noticed Luffy trot out of the tomb after the vampire but his breath caught when he saw the blood.

What happened down there? Did he use his blood to wake Whitebeard?

"Zehahaha, it's been a while, Pops!" Teach called, recovering quickly from his uncertainty when he caught sight of the large vampire. He certainly didn't look...great. Whitebeard was no doubt still weak from his long hibernation.

...wait, *Pops*!?

"What have you done, Teach?" The old vampire hissed, golden eyes practically glowing in anger as he took in the situation, "Was betraying your sire not enough for you? Now you attack young ones who've barely had a chance at life?"

"Well, I *was* here to kill you..." Teach replied, twisting slightly to cause Sabo more pain. Sadistic bastard. "...but these idiots got in my way. It's their fault, really." With a sharp exhale, Whitebeard brandished a rusty naginata at Sabo's captor, arms trembling slightly. The old man definitely wasn't in good enough shape to put up a fight despite his aggressive presence.

Ace held out his arm and Luffy came to him without hesitating. The teen was clearly in pain and had tried to stop the bleeding with a torn piece of his scarf. He whimpered quietly when he saw the situation they were in.

"S-Sabo..."

"Zehahaha, you see this, kid? *This* is your fault." Teach switched targets and focused on Luffy. He flinched at the accusation and held his wounded arm close to his belly. "Come back to me...and I won't kill this pathetic pureblood."

Before anyone could respond to the sick taunt, Whitebeard stabbed his naginata into the stone floor in front of them, making Ace instinctively draw Luffy back into his arms.

"So now you feed off your own kind? You have sunk to a new low, *Teach*. Come, fight me as you wish and release the young ones." Ace was a bit confused by the statement but also Whitebeard's response to the situation. He was...protecting them? Why would he do that? He didn't even know them!

"In your current state, you're easy prey." Teach answered, eyes glowing, "I'll finish you off once my panacea is secure. *Luffy*...don't make me wait."

"N-No..." The boy managed, clearly very afraid, "I-I don't-"

"Fine then." Teach huffed, like he was getting annoyed, "I guess I've stalled enough." With a smirk, the vampire clenched his fist and Sabo went completely rigid. Everyone was silent when he tossed the pureblood's body aside like it was nothing. The blonde didn't move. Even as Ace went to scream, Luffy beat him to it.

However, as he called for Sabo, dark tendrils came up behind him and coiled around his body like rope.

"No!" Ace managed, just as Teach dragged Luffy towards him. The boy grunted in pain when he collided with the sick bastard and he wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Welcome back, *blood bag*~" He whispered in the boy's ear, making him go rigid with terror. Ace snarled but wasn't sure what to do. Sabo needed help but so did Luffy and with Whitebeard still waking up, their options were slim. Luffy, however, surprised him by actually trying to escape from the monster of his nightmares.

The boy twisted and screamed his throat dry trying to get away, prompting Teach to clamp a disgusting hand over his mouth.

"Shhhhh...it's okay. I'm going to take care of you."

"Release him, Teach!" Whitebeard demanded, but when he tried to take a step forward, his knee buckled under his own weight. The ancient vampire cursed, making Teach laugh.

"Such a decrepit old man! Why don't I put you out of your misery!?" Ace watched with horror when the darkness returned and wrapped Luffy up tightly. Teach let him go and the tendrils caught him, holding his small form slightly behind the evil vampire. They wrapped him up like a mummy, obscuring even his mouth so he couldn't scream.

Ace clenched his fist when he met Luffy's wide-eyed gaze, calling forth as much fire as he could. He had to take Teach out and save his little brother, but could he do it? There was a good chance the bastard would use Luffy as a shield if he attacked him. What could he do against this vampire who had such odd abilities!?

"LUFFY!" Someone yelled without warning, drawing his attention. Suddenly, a cloaked figure rushed towards the distracted Teach and cut through the darkness with two swords, freeing Luffy from their hold. Ace's eyes widened when the person caught his still trussed up baby brother and skidded to a halt. The hell...?

Teach snarled when Luffy was taken from him and made to attack the unknown figure, but then a blonde vampire got in between them. Ace gaped when the new vampire kicked Teach straight in the teeth, causing him to stumble backwards.

"Yo, Ace...been a little while."

"You're..." Ace muttered, suddenly recognizing the spiral-browed blonde. It was Sanji, the Vinsmoke who'd defected to their (*Marco's*) side. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Helping." Sanji answered before lighting a cigarette, "Oi, he okay, Zoro?"

'Zoro?' Ace thought, turning to watch the cloaked figure as he cut through Luffy's bonds. The boy reached up and attached himself to the person like a monkey (making him slightly jealous...but that wasn't important).

"You came...you really came." Luffy managed through shaky sobs. The person then removed their hood, revealing familiar green hair.

"I always keep my promises."

---

### **Prior to the fight...**

"Damn it." Zoro cursed, bringing the jeep to a halt yet again when he almost run into another ruin. While he was strangely grateful to the blonde vampire for sending him in what he hoped was the right direction, 'east' was pretty general. How was he supposed to track Luffy through the wastes?

With a scowl, Zoro put the vehicle in reverse and backed away from the ancient metal wall. For once in his life, he was annoyed he didn't have the incredible tracking abilities of a vampire...and the heat was *killing him*. He pulled his cloak further over his face.

The wastes were as brutal as ever...

"You know, I did say *east*."

Zoro gasped when a voice spoke up from behind him. He spun around with a hand on his closest hilt and glared up at the familiar vampire casually smoking on his bumper.

"You...did you follow me?"

"Sure did." The vampire admitted while blowing out a puff of smoke, "I was curious how your search was going...definitely didn't expect to see you going *north* though."

"North?" Zoro echoed, glancing up at the sun. Hadn't he been going east? Shaking the uncertainty from his mind, he stood up and drew one of his swords. "Leave. *Now*."

The vampire lowered his cigarette at Zoro's hissed demand and simply appraised him for a moment, making him shuffle. Was he going to be captured? Locked up like livestock? He

would rather die than be collared again. Zoro tensed when the blonde vampire dropped a hand into his pocket and pulled out a small device.

"Would it help if I could give you more specific directions? Turns out sires can instinctively sense where their fledglings are...to a degree. Lord Phoenix gave me an area where Ace might be."

"That's bull."

"It's the truth." The vampire shot back with a shrug, "Well, mostly. So long as Ace still has some of Marco's blood in him, their bond is pretty strong. Plus there happens to be an important structure nearby so..." Zoro lowered one of his blades slightly.

"Why are you trying to help me?"

He couldn't understand why his *enemy* had gone out of his way to put him on the right path.

"I have my reasons." The vampire replied while pocketing his hands, "So, you in?"

Zoro frowned but reached out his hand for the device. His scowl deepened when the vampire refused to give it to him.

"If I let you go off on your own, you're bound to get lost."

"Wha-" Zoro scoffed, "No I won't!" The blonde raised an eyebrow.

"Right...because you haven't been going the wrong direction this entire time."

...the bastard had a point.

"Let's call a truce until you find your friend." The vampire added, thrusting his hand out in a disgustingly human gesture, "My name is Sanji." Zoro snarled at him but put his swords away.

"Fine, but I don't like it."

'Sanji' just huffed and took another drag.

"Let's get this over with then."

---

They'd arrived just in time. Zoro worked hard to catch his breath as Luffy held onto him, trying to take in everything at once. He had no idea who the freaky vampire was but he did recognize Ace and Sabo, the Second. The former looked hurt (which was a bit scary considering how strong Luffy's 'brother' was known to be) and the pureblood appeared... dead.

What kind of enemy did they face?

Other things that caught his attention were the ancient, newly awakened vampire (and dog) along with Luffy's metal arm.

"H-How did-" Zoro managed, eyeing the artificial limb. Luffy, who was coming down from a clear panic attack, clenched the metal into a fist.

"...later. I'll tell you l-later, okay?"

Zoro nodded and helped his friend to his feet, minding his injuries. Had that freckled bastard brought Luffy into the wastes just to wake a dangerous fiend?

"Tch, no matter how many of you show up, you can't save everyone." The decaying vampire snarled, prompting Ace to hiss at him, "Your precious *Sabo* is already gone." At that statement (before Zoro could stop him), Luffy rushed to his feet and sprinted towards the prone pureblood. Immediately, the enemy tried to grab him but Ace and Sanji got in his way.

Zoro could only watch, dumbfounded, as Luffy thrust his bloody forearm into the Second's mouth. Why was he trying to save him? They should be running!

"Young one."

Zoro flinched when the deep voice of the ancient called out to him.

"If we are to defeat this menace, we must work together." He didn't dare respond to the elderly vampire's statement, afraid of what he wanted from him. Probably his blood, which he wasn't willing to give. Against his will, Zoro turned and met the vampire's determined gaze. "Please, lend me your strength."

"I won't let you drink from me." Zoro shot back, eyes drawn back to the battle when the terrifying vampire almost got Ace with his teeth. The tendrils kept Ace and Sanji from getting too close. Luffy, meanwhile, continued to force feed the Second his blood and was looking pale.

"I don't want your blood," The vampire surprisingly responded while straightening up to his full height, "I want your assistance. Unfortunately, I am not currently strong enough to be of much help, but *you*...you are a swordsman, correct?"

Zoro nodded, unsure how else to respond. The ancient then pointed towards a small room off the main catacomb that had a single coffin inside. Two torches framed it and cast an eerie blue light on the stone floor. A traditional family seal decorated the wall behind the coffin, drawn in some sort of red paint.

"Retrieve one of the weapons inside and I will help you wield it."

"...why?"

"I must do what I can to protect the youth of this age." The vampire replied, eyes flicking to the ongoing fight and Luffy's bloody arm, "...to make up for where I failed. Now go! There is no time to waste."



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