

I don't draw, nor am I Japanese. Covers all the bases, really.

Sorry this took so long, guys. I did Grammarly it, which took me several days, and the romance... the romance it killed me. I wanted to move the two couples forward into being real, but I still think the two scenes are too similar. Tell me what you think about it. I will be posting the HP poll results an hour after this goes live, and I will start work on it tomorrow. I will obviously need to cut down the chapter size, but hey, this one makes up for it by being a little more than 15,000 words longer than it should have been.

In other news, Hiryo did see Stallion, and then I took his suggestions aboard and sent the chapter off to Tomon. He will, hopefully get the chapter back to me on the 30th. That means I will post it on Halloween.

Warning: OCs abound. None of Garp's crew beyond Bogard have ever been introduced in canon (if you can find names, tell me guys) so I created new characters all over the place, and gave them mixed bags in terms of Marine/New World tricks. I try not to concentrate on them to the exclusion of the action and the MHA characters, but they are kind of important.

Have fun, guys!

10/28/2025 – thanks go to Daniel Neil, who mentioned a little issue in the chapter about Izuku swimming. I have changed that segment of the chapter, and you can check the changes by going to the first (*) and reading until the second.

Chapter 8: Dead End Erased

Contrary to what many people who knew Garp, the first night out from Elena was quiet. The rest of the marines allowed the kids to get a good night's sleep in their new quarters, getting used to the ship's movement and the noises of the men on watch. On any vessel at sea, there had to be people on watch, and the larger the ship, the more people and more communication, which, as Tenya had pointed out, was all listed in the Marines Rules and Regulations handbook.

Further, this was the Grand Line. That meant that, aside from shouts of "Three of the clock, all points check in!" followed by answering reports, there were also "Monster sighting off the port bow!" and "Incoming waterspout dead ahead, all hands to the rigging, shift the sails --" throughout the night. To say it made for an uneasy sleep for the teens was an understatement.

Added to this was that the majority of them, boys and girls, were not sleeping in proper bunks. Instead, they were sleeping in hammocks. Aboard a marine vessel, the Midshipmen bunked in with the seamen, and it was they who got first choice of bunks on the actual deck of the first of three gun decks the ship contained. As none of the midshipmen had remained behind with Bogard, all the bunks still had owners. The majority of the seamen slept in hammocks throughout the gun decks, so the boys were given the same treatment.

This proved to be an issue for both Tenya and Shoto, as the others learned the next day when they were roused at dawn by a bugle. “Up and at ‘em, ya reefers! It’s a lovely dawn mornin’ here on the Grand Line, how dare you still be abed! Up, up I say!”

The ship’s Master-At-Arms was an individual the group of teens had been introduced to before, but he hadn’t actually had much to do with their training before this, bar their education in the ropeyard. He was a middle-aged man, shorter than Kirishima, who was the shortest of the boys thanks to Izuku having had a growth spurt over a few months. Garland, which was his name, was heavily tanned, as were most of the marines from days at sea in the wind and sun and had a larger voice than you would think could come from such a short man.

Tenya tried to roll out of the bunk, already apologizing, but his voice became almost instantly muffled as his mufflers caught on the hammock. He instead nearly slammed face-first into the deck, and would have if not for Izuku jumping forward to grab him around the waist.

“Hmmpf, ya can’t make those engine things shrink or somethin’ can ya?” Garland muttered. “Ya might need to be assigned a bunk then, my young gentleman.” Midshipmen were often called that by the other Midshipmen, which, despite his grandiose title, Garland was.

“I am so sorry, sir! I must, this is, I will get used to sleeping and leaving the hammock, sir! I will not ask the marines to give me special dispensation, such would be against regulations!” Tenya answered, saluting, red with embarrassment.

“We’ll see. But if you can’t, we’ll go with that. Anyway, you all better get going. You’ve got forty minutes for chow, and then a meeting with the cap’n. I’ll be seeing you all after that, once you’ve been assigned your duties and shifts.”

“Er, we’re gonna be performing duties on top of training?” Kirishima mumbled, scratching at his hair. His hair was no longer the red it had been when they arrived in this world, nor did it stick up as it had previously been. The story of why he’d wanted to remake his image had been shared all the way back on the first island, but even now, Izuku still felt that red had suited his hot-blooded friend better.

“Of course you are!” Garland boomed. Like Kirishima most of the time, it seemed as if Garland’s volume control was always set to high. “Everyone aboard a man-of-war is awake for two of the three watches. One watch is for personal maintenance, keeping your uniforms clean, sewing, training and the like. And abroad this vessel, my young gentlemen, you better believe our training is harsh! The other will be for being on actual duty, as the cap’n will explain.”

Nodding at that, while Tenya remonstrated with Kirishima about not having already read through the primer, Izuku saluted, and, with an arm on Shoto’s shoulder, led the way out of the gun deck and to the stairs leading down to the galley. Shoto still looked out of it, and Izuku asked, “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know how much actual sleep I got last night,” Shoto grumbled. “How can anyone sleep on hammocks? They move and shift, and then there’s the shifting of the whole vessel! I know our own vessel wasn’t all that calm to be aboard, but this ship seems to wallow about more. To say nothing about the shouting.”

“Shoto! Those are not shouts; those are required exchanges given by the men on watch, the men who are responsible for the upkeep and sailing of the vessel at night, as the handbook would have told you. We all have a duty to uphold as prospective marines to be aware of all regulations and laws and follow them at all times,” Tenya said, his hand chopping.

“Maybe, but none of that is actually going to help me get used to the shouts and everything else, will it?” Shoto asked, his voice rising from its normal deadpan tone only very slightly as he looked at Tenya.

“I... cannot say it will, no, other than proving to you the necessity of such exchanges. I can also admit to being uncomfortable in bed. My engines kept on scrapping against the hammock or getting caught,” Tenya confessed as they reached the galley. “Still, as prospective marine officers, we should have the mental fortitude to bear with such hardship.

The girls had already arrived, staking out a table at the far end of the large galley. As they passed them, the others all welcomed them while Jirou just nodded, looking as sleepy as Shoto and Tenya. Soon the boys were back, and the group settled in to eat, exchanging explanations of how it had gone the night before as more marines came and went, including Garp, who apparently ate with his men, something Izuku noted and approved of.

All of them were unaware of the trouble brewing in the mind of one of their fellows, one Mei Hatsume in this instance.

Finishing eating quickly was something that Mei had perfected at a very young age. After all, the more time you spent eating, the less time you had to devote to experiments and science. The breakfast had been simple fair but filling, and Mei wasn’t really the kind to notice

what she'd been eating most of the time anyway. Unless it was bananas. They were truly one of the universe's best creations, although why her mom had told her not to eat whole bananas around other people, Mai had no idea.

Swallowing her last bite of whatever it had been, she looked up at a Corporal their own age who had come over to tell them where to find Garp's office. He had also described all the other officers aboard ship and where to find them, for when the teens would be assigned their various duties. He had just said something about how they would be split up to work on specific tasks.

"So, when are we installing engines?" she asked, interrupting the man.

"What?" The midshipman asked, blinking, nonplussed at both the interruption and Mai's words. "This ship doesn't have engines."

"It doesn't **now**, but that's easily fixed with my genius!" Mei said gleefully.

Around her, the other teens all looked at one another, then back at Mai, trying hard to think of a way to let Mei down gently on this point.

The Corporal, on the other hand, had no such thoughts. "Midshipman Mei," he began formally, shaking his head. "First of all, when you address a superior officer, you need to address them as such. For myself and other noncommissioned officers, it would be either our rank followed by our name, if we're being extremely formal, or simply Corporal if we're not. Since I understand most of the training you all have been doing on land was to get you caught up to speed on various other matters, and discipline was left by the wayside, I will allow this moment to go unnoticed."

Oh no, Melissa thought, exchanging a glance with Momo, who she could also tell had recognized the kind of person this young corporal was. *We have a petty tyrant on our hands. This is not going to go well.*

"As for the idea of reconfiguring our ship, there are numerous issues with that concept. First, we don't have any engine parts."

"Give me access to your machine shop and I'll have you or your reports, don't worry," Mei said, very obviously having missed the corporal's change in tone, or the glare that accompanied it.

Nope, not going well at all. But for some reason, I can't look away. It's like staring at a train wreck. You know it's going to be bad, but I can't look away, Melissa mused internally, while Jirou smirked next to Momo, her jacks reaching over to poke at Izuku when he made to open his mouth. Evidently, Melissa was not the only one who was going to enjoy this show. After the

revelations and the extremely serious argument they'd had about what the woman who called herself Hana had told them, some nonserious fun might just be what the doctor ordered for all of them this morning, the blonde reflected.

"Second of all, what would be use for fuel?" The corporal went on, his voice and expression hardening as he stared down at Mei, while a few midshipmen and sailors became aware of what was going on. Another midshipman, an older man, was already leaning in their direction. "While steamships and so forth are useful, there are simply places in the world that they cannot go. Many islands don't have any kind of coal or even coal equivalent, and no ship is large enough to bring along enough wood to burn in its place."

May blinked at that, then snorted. "Are you serious? We got along all right. Don't tell me that wind power," she gave the words 'wind power' as much emphasis as someone would give 'child molesting psychopath' "is your main propulsion, not by necessity but by **choice**!? If you can't use coal, you have to use Garp or something, anything else, right, like we did Shoto?"

At that, another officer came up behind the younger man, slapping a hand gently on his shoulder. It was only then that Melissa became aware of the fact that the first man had indeed been young, early twenties maybe? This second worthy laughed, shaking the first lightly as he addressed Mei. "While our superior officer is surely strong enough to get out and push the ship for any length of time you care to name, he's only done that a time or two when he's really drunk and has decided we need to get somewhere fast. It's not something we want to rely on."

He chuckled again, nodding over to where Garp still sat, reading a newspaper. "Sorry, young lady, but yeah, wind power is the way to go in this world, simply because it is the most reliable. Oh, there are some crews that can get by with officers or captains who have Devil Fruits that can help with that kind of thing, I know of one young pirate in particular that our admiral has a bee in his bonnet about who can get around quite easily because he's got the Mera Mera no Mi but even among Devil Fruits, ones that loan themselves to that kind of thing is rare. Nope, on this marine's ocean, you gotta have wind power."

For a moment, Mei stared at the man silently, and then, as the others had known would occur, she went off, flailing her arms in either direction, forcing Tenya and Shoto, who had taken seats on either side of her, to duck. "That's ridiculous! You call wind power, wind power of all things, **reliable**?! You're at the mercy of wind and wave by its very nature! What if you're becalmed or whatever the term is, what if the wind isn't pushing you in the direction you want to go, there's only so much those pulleys, levers and shit can do! Even the best kind of pulley system isn't going to be nearly as responsive as a screw propeller connected to a **true** steering system! And do not get me started about how much energy you're losing or how much..."

This went on for some time as the two officers' eyes widened, and the others sitting at the same table as the teens began to back away. Many of the other people in the mess hall, including Garp, who had dozed off into one of his narcoleptic naps for a moment behind his newspaper, roused themselves, staring over at the pink-haired girl who was apparently having some kind of psychotic episode.

This movement seemed to make Mai remember Garp, and she rounded on him, shouting, "Seriously?! You're supposedly this hero of the Marines and all that bullshit, and you rely on wind power! Find someone who's got a Devil Fruit that you can use at least! Better yet, get a better ship! Heck, I will build you your engines free of charge. Steam is the way to go! Wind power can suck it! I refuse to--"

At this point, her diatribe shifted into a full-on rant against anyone who thought wind power was useful, calling such individuals' ancestry into question several times. While Garp simply began to laugh, a lot of the other seamen in the mess hall seemed to take the curses sent toward the Marine organization as a whole a little more seriously. Many were taking their cue from Garp, but still, there were a few like that, and Izuku finally decided to act.

Looking over at Shoto, he mimed lifting up something in his hands. Shoto nodded, and as Izuku moved around Tenya, the two of them grabbed Mei's flailing hands, lifting her up out of her seat and dragging her off, still shouting about wind power.

Between his guffaws, Garp shouted, "Don't forget, oh-seven-hundred hours you lot. You all need to be assigned duties, not just births."

As Izuku freed a hand to salute and was nearly thrown off balance for his troubles, Garp shook his head, looking down at the meal he'd started before falling asleep. The newspaper was just a prop that he used to make people leave him alone as he ate.

Luckily, some of the meal, sausages and eggs, were still hot, and he began to eat slowly, his eyes far more thoughtful than most would give him credit for as they flicked over to the teens. That little rant had told him something that he had already vaguely recognized. Wherever these teens came from, it was very obviously a super-advanced island. Perhaps one that had not been found yet or had no connection whatsoever with the rest of the world.

Hell, she mentioned gasoline and solar energy, and I've only ever run into the first one, talking to Whitebeard about one of his ships, and the second when I was talking to Vegapunk at one point. But I don't want much of anything to do with that basket case most of the time. I'm going to have to get Roland to warn them about mentioning stuff like that. They all want to stay together, and having a few of them be forcibly inducted into the science division would probably sour the rest on being marines.

There were many admirals out there who wouldn't have cared about that. The kids were now midshipmen. They had signed up to be marines, and if they went back on their words they would become pirates, plain and simple. Even those who would want to try and keep a group of Devil Fruit users within the Marines would look at the bigger picture and believe the teens would get over being separated.

Garp, though, knew their bonds would make them all stronger in the end, and further, it was a major sticking point, not one the kids were liable to overlook. Regardless, they wanted to be marines with an almost crazy fervor, as if they were chasing a dream. That was enough for Monkey D. Garp to do what he could to make certain they didn't lose that fire, that drive when reality hit them.

Later, ensconced in his office aboard ship, Garp leaned back, propping his feet up on the desk at a point that had been worn down through years of him doing just that, as he looked over it at the teens.

The kids were all lined up in front of him in two rows, with the tallest to the left as most of the room, which had originally been the admiral's receiving room aboard the ship, had been cut away and then boxed by wood. To Melissa and Mei, it was obvious this was to give more room for something else, probably something that shifted from the decks below to the main deck above them.

"All right. You all know that this is a fighting vessel. Hah, we're sailing into trouble even now. That means everyone needs to pull their weight, regardless of how lazy I am about some of the regulations and stuff." Garp began, snickering internally at Tenya's sudden look of chagrin. *That boy's gonna be a master-at-arms within months, I swear.*

The Master-at-arms was nominally in charge of discipline and making certain the seaman and reefers, midshipmen who were not yet really officers, obeyed them and trained as they should. Aboard the Hound, Garp's ship, he handled creating and enforcing the training regimen up to a certain point, not Garland and his corporals. They did handle discipline still, but knew what to truly regulate and enforce and what not to. *I wonder if Tenya will ever get to that point. He seems a little too much of a stuffed shirt, really.*

"Besides that, I left Bogard and twenty of my own sailors behind to help bolster the defense of Elena as it was rebuilding. That means we're a little short-handed, so you'll need to actually do stuff aboard ship despite your ongoing training. Don't worry, though, I won't assign any of you to the bilges, unless Garland tells me yer slacking."

He waited until he got a chorus of yes servers, noting idly that Mei seemed to have fully recovered from her earlier Rand, although Shoto was standing close by, watching her a little warily. Might be best to keep those two together on one shift, then. "Momo, Kyoka, Tsuyu,

you're all still dealing with injuries, I can see. I've been told your ribs are still sore, but not enough to put you on half-duty, Tenya, and neither is your ankle, Shoto."

Both boys nodded, while the three girls just exchanged glances. Momo was easily the most injured of the group. She had sustained three broken ribs, a broken radius and ulna in one shoulder to go with nasty gashes to her upper arm and cheek from her battle with Gasparde. Thankfully, she didn't have any bruises any longer, so the ship's surgeon would be able to fit her with a full, hard cast to help protect her from further injuries. *It's still pretty damn impressive that she was able to outthink and overcome a logia type and survive at all, really. Even a weakling like Gasparde.*

Tsuyu's wounds were the oldest, but having been reopened in the battle against the pirates on Elena, the cuts she'd taken were still bad. Similarly, Jirou had taken a slash across her upper chest from one shoulder blade to another. It wasn't very deep, but it had bled profusely at the time, and she'd been bruised around the throat and elsewhere, even worse than Momo.

"While you three are on half-duty, you'll be working with my Navigator, Lieutenant Roland. You're going to be learning navigation, help in the supply room and doing odd jobs around the ship during your shifts. Your shift will be from the morning into the afternoon, what we call first watch, which is now. Judging by your scores on the tests we gave you, Momo, you're the best of all of you guys when it comes to pure math and memorization. Whereas Kyoka, when we tested you, you were able to notice changes in the weather on Elena. If you do a good enough job, we'll know where to put you going forward once you're both healed up. Tsuyu, you'll probably be asked to join Kirishima over there with my boatswain once your back is healed up and he needs help. You'll be serving on second watch, and for now you'll be a medical orderly."

Tsuyu nodded while Garp sent a grin Kirishima's way, who responded by breaking attention to give him a thumbs up, which Garp's grin widened at. Of all the teens, Kirishima was perhaps the most like himself at the moment, both in terms of his fighting style and general attitude. *I'm going to make that boy a Marine to make more pirates howl in fear! Him and Izuku.* When it came to combat styles, the two of them were easily the ones who would get the most out of Garp training them personally. "You showed that you had a great hand at woodworking and overall seamanship, so there's little my crew will be able to teach you all about sails and so forth. Repairing ships, though, that you need some more experience with."

"Yes, sir!" Kirishima shouted, and Garp nodded, looking around at the others for a moment, deciding to change tack for a second.

"When I say you'll be on watch, that means you will be awake and working for that watch under the ship's carpenter. That'll be half your day. The other half, which will be the

second watch for most of you but not all, will be taken up by training. Some of that training will be the same for all of you, while those of you who're wounded will be simply getting a larger helping of endurance training and training you about life aboard ship. You'll need to learn the commands generally given aboard a marine vessel, pennant signals, and so forth. You'll also be tested on basic marine knowledge, so I suggest you all read that little handbook you got from Jonathan when you were sworn in."

Tenya looked as if he was vibrating a little at the very idea, his every inch showing delight, causing Garp to roll his eyes. *Yep, definitely Master-at-Arms material.* He didn't have very many people like that aboard his ship, who lived for following rules and regulations, but he understood their place in the great scheme of things, at least.

"Your physical training, those of you aren't injured, will be with me up on the main deck. Sometimes it'll be below in the third gun deck. Melissa, Shoto, and Mei, will be assigned to the gun crew, again on second watch I think, though I'll leave that to Yama." He paused, looking at Shoto, who looked as if he had a question. "And for your information, Shoto, your Devil Fruit doesn't get you out of working a watch even if, in battle, ya wouldn't be assigned there. Same for Kirishima and Izuku. A lot of fights take place on the ocean at long range, when we're exchanging cannonballs with the enemy. I never got the impression that your power is something that you can use at that kind of range, am I right?"

"Definitely not," Shoto said, shrugging his shoulders. "I can maybe send out a jet of flame a few hundred meters, but it starts to peter out eventually, and it tires me out the more range I add to it."

"Then that's something you'll need to be training yourself on. Until you do, you'll be on defense in any kind of battle with your ice walls," Garp said firmly, his tone suddenly deadly serious, causing them all to stiffen back into attention, which all but Tenya and Momo had allowed to slide for a moment. "On this ship, if there is an underlying rule for training that I follow, it's that exhaustion makes cowards of us all. When we go into a fight, no crew out there is **ever** going to be able to out-endurance **my** Marines. Understood?"

They all nodded and chorused 'yes, sir' but then, Mei raised a hand. Amused, Garp gestured for her to speak, and she asked, "While we're working on the gun deck, can we at least see if we can figure out ways to help your cannonball delivery system or the guns themselves work better?"

"Cannonball delivery system?" Izuku asked, blinking.

"I see at least some of my crew have already talked about what I do during a fight?" Garp laughed again, shaking his head. "Yeah, that's fine if my carpenter, Foril, agrees with your

changes. Run anything by him first, or I won't be held responsible for the punishment details Garland enforces."

Melissa and Izuku were assigned to the main deck to work under Sail Master Whitman on third watch, the man in charge of following the navigator's orders when it came to the position of the sails and the upkeep of every part of the rigging. That threw Tsuyu, who knew enough about wind-powered vessels to know that the person who looked after the sails and kept them in working trim was a noncommissioned officer. Here, he was a senior ship officer. Odd, but after a second Tsuyu decided to put it down to how hard the Grand Line could be on vessels, particularly sails.

"That'll put you out there at night, working with Whitman personally. His lieutenants are in charge of the sails during the other watches unless we expect combat, but they aren't to the point where they can stand watch. Beyond that, Kirishima, Izuku, you two will be my personal students while aboard ship."

Standing watch was essentially being in charge during a watch on deck or somewhere else on the ship. To do that, you needed to have taken several tests and been proven competent enough to be in charge of the ship's welfare, which, more than anywhere else, on the Grand Line was a challenge to say the least. With Bogard no longer aboard, Garp was missing one of the officers who could do so.

Both men nodded, even if Izuku looked a little concerned about the idea of needing to sleep during the morning. Ignoring that, Garp went on, detailing who was really in charge of the ship day to day, admitting that he didn't really run his ship all that often except in combat. Outside of combat, it was up to the first mate, or rather now the second mate, to see to the running of the ship on a day-to-day basis.

"Now, with all that said, let's get out there onto the main deck and get started! The rest of you, you've got your own watches to report to," Garp said, surging to his feet. "I'll be seeing you later to work out personalized training regimes for you all."

Once on deck, Garp flicked a button set into the mainmast, and Kirishima and Izuku watched in surprise as a portion of the deck shifted away, a smaller hatch there enlarging quickly. From out of the hatch, there became a noise like an engine starting up, making Kirishima mutter, "We need to keep Mei away from this thing, whatever it is."

Izuku nodded slowly, and after a second, there came a belch of smoke out of the hole. Then a conveyor belt shifted up into view, marked with large stoppers every few feet. The conveyor belt began to move, and out of the whole came dozens of massive cannonballs. Far larger than any kind of cannonball that could have been actually used on the guns aboard the ship, these looked as if they were four or five times larger.

Garp hefted one into the air easily, then began to bounce it from one finger to another, the ball bouncing into the air several feet before coming down, then bouncing again. "This is what Mei meant about my cannonball delivery system. And these..."

He flicks one of the balls towards Izuku, who gaped, holding his arms wide to try and catch the cannonball. It slammed into him, sending Izuku stumbling backward several feet before he could stop himself. Kirishima did a little better a second later, already crouching to receive the cannonball that was larger than his upper body. He could barely hold the thing and soon had to set it on the deck between his feet.

"Will be your first weights while aboard ship." With that, Garp marched over to what had heretofore looked like a series of metal bars strapped to the side of the foremast. He pulled one out of its housing, then, shifting over to Izuku, he reached down and twirled the cannonball in the younger man's arms until a hole was poking up towards the sky. He then inserted the rod, which Izuku saw now had two ends on it that looked as if they had been tooled to resemble a screw, which he worked into the hole on the cannonball. Within moments, he had a monstrously sized weight.

Kirishima reckoned that he could maybe lift one side of that thing twice before needing a rest. Izuku felt he could lift the entirety, but he would need to use One For All after the first six reps. Garp, to the kids' astonishment, lifted the entire weight in one hand as if it were as light as a feather, even going so far as to twirl the thing as if it were a weapon, ignoring how the metal of the solid pipe began to groan and bend. "This will be how you train for at least an hour every day. Kirishima, don't worry, there's another set of cannonballs coming up that'll be smaller than these."

Looking around, Kirishima and Izuku noticed that several other Marines had pulled out simple benches, setting them up around the foremast behind the bowsprit of the ship. Several of the other Marines were already hard at work at two of these benches, lifting far more normal-looking weights, and Garp gestured to them now. "Normally, I'll be out here supervising this personally, or my bosun will."

The bosun, or boatswain, was in charge of the away boats and, on Marine vessels, made certain that everyone could swim competently enough. As they were known to have 'Devil Fruits', the teens wouldn't be practicing swimming, of course. But Garp warned Izuku that he and the other non-sailors among the group would also be questioned during this time on the various sails and other information they needed as sailors aboard a sailing ship.

As he finished muttering about how he wouldn't be doing that with them because it was boring, Garp paused for a moment, reaching into a pocket to flick out a penny, as he stared over the side of the ship. At the moment, it was a bright sunny day, perhaps a little too hot to be

truly comfortable under that sun, given how much Izuku was already sweating, and the waves underneath the ship were powerful, making the ship bob up and down to the point it would've been grossly uncomfortable if the teams had already gotten their sea legs under them. Despite that, it seemed like the Grand Line wasn't trying to kill them at that specific moment.

However, a loud splashing noise from one side reminded everyone there that the weather wasn't the only danger on the Grand Line. A giant monster that could only be described as a mix between a zebra, an octopus and a plesiosaur reared up, hissing as it made towards the ship, the mouths at the end of its octopus tentacles open.

"Eventually, you'll get strong enough to do things like this. The Binger Bomb is a technique that most marine captains learn, and it's really useful both when fighting against monsters and against other enemy vessels occasionally." With that, Garp held up his hand, the penny he had been playing with resting between his fingers.

He wasn't aiming towards the head of the monster, though. No, Izuku thought he was aiming somewhere below the water. Why, he didn't know, but a moment later, the penny flashed out from Garp's hand, faster than anything Izuku had seen in real life before save for All Might's vanishing act after their first heroics lesson. The penny didn't quite leave an afterimage, but it was close, and when it slammed into the water, there was a booming noise as if the ship had just fired off every cannon aboard.

While the technique might be a normal one for many marine captains, Izuku doubted that those marine captains could all fling a penny in such a manner that the penny would create a super-cavitation wave when it hit the water, as he could see this one did. Or hit with enough force to literally cause a creature to explode upon impact.

Which this finger bomb did. An instant after the penny had slammed into the water and created the tunnel through it that Izuku could track for a second, there was an explosion underneath the water. Blood and viscera exploded upwards out of the water and everywhere, changing the color of the water to red for a few seconds. It was evident that there'd been a lot more to that monster underneath the waves than on top.

"Men! We're eating monster meat today!" Garp shouted, getting a whoop of delight from many of the sailors.

After weightlifting, which was not just for the arms but also for the legs and core, Garp had Izuku and Kirishima spar with him. Well, Garp called it sparring. Izuku would've called it an MMA fight against a monster. Even holding back so he didn't damage the ship, Garp was so far above the pair of teens it wasn't even funny.

After the weight training and everything else, Kirishima simply didn't have enough endurance to keep going. He barely lasted more than thirty minutes after being called over to wrestle with Garp. In contrast, every time Izuku was slammed to the deck, he hopped up, eager for more.

Halfway through their training like this, Garp ordered Izuku to stop using his devil through powers... even as he slammed the boy to the deck with an arm throw Izuku didn't even see coming. "It feels like it's just a basic enhancer fruit for now. There's probably some kind of trick to it, but if that's the way you're going to use it right now, then building up your basic strength is more useful than working with it. It'll help you take on more of your own power."

Actually, Garp knew, he would be testing to see if at least Izuku and Kirishima had Haki, a special technique that allowed the users to use their willpower in various ways. Garp wasn't certain that Kirishima would be able to, but if he could, his durability would skyrocket.

As for Izuku, well, there, Garp was almost certain that given his drive, it was just a matter of time before he exhibited some haki. Of course, truly testing for that kind of thing was almost impossible to do on a ship unless you didn't care what happened to easy-to-break things such as the wood of the vessel or the majority of your crew, and with the mission that the higher-ups had given him, Garp wasn't going to wreck his own ship. Not just yet.

Maybe after we're done clearing out these pirates who were stupid enough to come together for the Dead End Race? We'll have to see. Hahaha, I'm lookin' forward to seeing how much training these two can take! It's been a long while since I had a proper apprentice.

OOOOOOO

While Kirishima and Izuku were being introduced to Garp's version of the typical gym bro culture up on the main deck, Momo, Jirou and Tsuyu were introduced to Garp's second mate, Roland. He was a middle-aged man with shoulder-length black hair and a scar going down from his forehead right to his ear, along with a pair of glasses perched on his nose. Unlike several of the lower-ranking sailors they had seen aboard ship so far, though, he didn't let his eyes stray down to Momo's chest. Despite that, Momo recognized him as someone who had not had that much control when they had first come in for breakfast that morning, and Mei had been with them.

Mind you, Hatsume hadn't remembered a bra that morning. Given that and how much Mei... bounced, it was understandable how much attention she had garnered, at least in Momo's opinion. Jirou hadn't been nearly as understanding, and her earjacks had stabbed several a seaman and even one of the other midshipmen who had stared just a bit too long before Melissa and Tsuyu convinced Mei to head back to their room and put on a bra.

Roland had a thin-seeming body, but fit, moving lightly on his feet, a warm manner, and thin, dexterous fingers. He wore a normal marine sailor's outfit rather than an officer's, but had a second lieutenant's bars on his chest, and a series of pouches and writing implements stuffed into a special belt. Despite his wandering eyes that morning, looking at the man now, Momo was reminded of what she had seen of Melissa's father in appearance, except he also gave off this feeling of experienced strength, so to speak.

When Roland spoke, it was simple, clear and explained well, with references to both the marine handbook and a few of the items and tools they would be using as navigators. He went into detail on what the ship's surgeon had said they would be doing for exercise, and the duties of a Navigator on a normal marine vessel on both the Grand Line and other oceans, and what he expected of them when it came to learning such duties.

When the man finished, Jirou raised a hand. "Sir, I was told that I'd be getting some specific training to become more aware of what my jacks can tell me about the weather and other stuff like that. Could you give me more details on that? I just don't, well, understand what that means."

"Ah. Well, I'll have to talk to Garp about that, but to start with, I will be teaching all of you meditation and mental tools that allow you to, well, open your mind to the world around you. I realize that sounds very mystical, but it actually does work. You'll be doing those on your own free time, of course. When you're on the clock as part of my watch, you'll be doing duties I assign you. But I am a New World veteran, which means I can teach you a great deal, not just in terms of my own duties or the typical marine doctrine," Roland answered, shaking his head with a wry little smile.

"We've heard that term before, but is it really so much more dangerous than what you all call Paradise, kero?" Tsuyu asked. "I can't imagine it being so much more dangerous except maybe when it comes to the various monsters and pirates you can meet, kero."

While Roland raised an eyebrow at the use of the phrase 'what you all call Paradise', he answered readily enough. Like the other officers and indeed more than a few of the enlisted aboard the Hound, he was proud to have survived time in that horrendous ocean.

"On the contrary, PO, the New World's weather is even wilder and far more dangerous than Paradise. Here, as you can see, there are days with no bad weather, no storms or similar. In the New World, those days are as rare as a full moon. The background polarity of the entire ocean is so bad that the New World demands an entirely different Log Pose, one built on three needles rather than one, since the magnetic fields of some islands change or even are completely overridden by the background magnetic field of the ocean at random."

Momo's eyes legitimately crossed for a second as she tried to work out how that was physically possible, but while his lips twitched briefly at her look of horror, Roland continued. "You see far more bizarre weather patterns there normally, with things like waterspouts happening far more often, along with what we call shearing currents, storms that are far more powerful, and other things of that nature. Fog, for another example, which you can barely push a hand through, let alone see through."

"And, and there's also the Yonko to consider. How, how do they impact things?" Momo asked hesitantly, trying to come back to the here and now from the horror of the changing magnetic field nonsense. *Oh dear, I hope Melissa is sitting down when she learns about that one. Mei won't care, but Melissa-chan certainly will.*

"Hmm... good question, but with an answer that doesn't quite go with the normal marine way of dealing with pirates, understand?" Roland looked at the three women who nodded. "The Yonko are not an issue in terms of conquering World Government-aligned islands, none of them do that for various reasons. Kaido is a monster, but he is a monster in a cave. Just don't go in the cave. Big Mom expands slowly, but outside of her food-based rampages, she is a containable problem. The Totto Land archipelago is self-sustaining. Whitebeard..."

His gaze hardened, and he poked the desk in front of him, which was strewn with various parchments and tools, to emphasize his words. "Whitebeard is the strongest Yonko in terms of territory and crew strength, but he is also the kindest in terms of how he rules his territory. He keeps those waters more peaceful than even the World Government can. Shanks does the same, although his territory is far smaller, as is his crew. Garp has an... understanding with both those Yonko, which allows for trade between them and World Government-allied islands. Not much, but it's there. Think of them more as foreign nations, rather than pirates. But only aboard this ship. Don't even mention them in front of any other high-ranking marines. Understand?"

The three girls nodded again, and he continued. "Now, your duties as my aides will..." From there, Roland went into detail about what they would be doing aboard ship, specifically what they would need to be doing in the storerooms, their duties as part of his work team and other things of that nature.

That evening, everyone was in the mess hall at the same time, even the group that should have been asleep, like Izuku and Melissa. As they came over to a table that had somehow been claimed by them already by this point, the three girls stopped and stared at the completely immobile, groaning masses that were the uninjured group of teens.

"So, what happened to you all, kero?" Tsuyu asked in her normal blunt manner.

Melissa just moaned while Mei snorted, shaking her head. "Tsu-chan, the marines have no chill at all when it comes to training! I'm the strongest between me and Blondy, and even my arms want to fall off."

"My legs, my brother, my family would be, be horrified and appalled at my weakness..." Tenya groaned, barely able to raise his head. It wasn't just his legs that were sore, after all, but his whole body. Particularly his neck for some reason.

In all honesty, this was just because Tenya had to crane his neck to look up at Garp so often throughout the day, an exercise the tall youth was altogether unused to.

"Garp, he's some monster man, a monster! Hell, most of these Marines are monsters!" Kirishima groaned. "I have never been around a manlier bunch of seamen, and that's saying something, and it pains me, pains me to my soul I can't keep up with them. I tried, I really did to get up there in the sails with the rest of them, but after training with Garp, my arms, they just wouldn't work. Not manly at all, bro, just...not...manly."

"The standards that even the seamen aboard this ship are forced to keep to in terms of endurance training, let alone weight training, are incredible. I admit I was quite leery about using that strange conveyor creation to exercise on, but it worked. And after he realized I needed more endurance training, Garp just kept me on that machine long after everyone else had finished," Shoto grumbled.

"It was crazy!" Izuku said, his voice muffled by the fact that he basically face-planted into the wood of the table. "I can't feel my arms! I can barely feel my spine. My legs, well, I wish I didn't feel them."

"Indeed." Tenya agreed in commiseration. "I haven't felt the burn this badly since I first grew my engines."

"Meli-chan, Meli-chan, are you awake?" Momo asked hesitantly, reaching over to touch the blond. "Um, I don't think sleeping in your food like that is very healthy."

Only a snore answered her, and Kyoka snorted. "If that's what we have to look forward to when we're all healed up, I'm not sure I want to be healed up." As she only needed to wait until the last of her bruises and the shallow cut across her upper chest healed, Kyoka would be the first of the three injured girls to join the rest.

"We also had to stop and pitch in when the storm hit," Izuku said, groaning as he shifted his head to stare across at the girls. "Getting all the weights and stuff under deck was not fun."

"I remember that, it only lasted about ten minutes," Momo said, frowning thoughtfully as Kirishima apologized again for not being any help, while Shoto and Tenya were just silent.

“We were still being shown the navigation tables we will need to memorize at the time, and all Roland did was stick his head out one of the portholes, sniff the wind and shout something up to the deck.”

“Squall North Northeast, probably won’t last very long. No need to avoid it, shift sails to adapt,” Kyoka responded, repeating what Roland had said almost word for word. “Which is funny because I thought that we were told back on Clockwork Island that no one could predict the weather of the Grand Line. Maybe it’s because he got so used to the New World that paradise seems easy in comparison.”

All three of the exhausted boys lifted their heads at that, blinking, and Momo took a moment to explain the details they had gotten about the New World, while Kyoka helped Melissa up out of her meal before heading over to the galley’s serving area, making several trips to come back with food for all of them. Melissa had been the only one to grab food before sitting down, but had evidently collapsed a second after sitting down.

When she returned with plates of food, Izuku tried to lift his head enough to start eating, but had to have Tsuyu help him sit up for a moment. “What else have you all been up to? Garp had me training all day, so I haven’t even started my duty station stuff yet. I have that to look forward to after this,” Izuku said, his voice sounding almost sarcastic for the first time any of them had ever heard from the normally sunny green-haired teen. He then looked over shyly at Momo. “And, um, I, I hate to ask, but could I perhaps get some of the sunblock you made? I’m afraid both Shoto and I are liable to burn quickly if we run into too many days without storm and cloud and spend so much of our time out on deck.”

“Oh, Amaterasu, yes!” Shoto said, shaking his head. “I can already feel my face burning from how much time I spent out there despite the marine cap.”

Momo nodded agreeably. “Actually, you can just requisition some from the stores if you want some. They’ve got a good deal of sunblock on board, and it actually might be better than the type I bought on Clockwork Island.” Lying about where she got some of the items she had Created was becoming second nature at this point, much to Momo’s low-key chagrin. “And they also have some aloe, Shoto. As for what we’ve been up to...”

From there, she described all of the duties they have been shown and what they would each have been assigned to do on their various watches, becoming somewhat annoyed as she did. While Tsuyu and Kyoka would take at least a few hours in the galley every day to help the cooks, the cooks had quickly learned that Momo couldn’t cook at all, and Roland had used that as an excuse to second her for more training with him. “According to the tests we were given back on Elena, I’ve got the best head for numbers among us all, even Melissa and Mei, which

I'm not sure I believe, and honestly, I would just prefer to be better at cooking," she admitted after some gentle ribbing from Kyoka brought out the reason why she was pouting a little.

Izuku let the girls' talk wash over him for a few moments, recovering slowly from the rigors of the day. *All Might's American Dream Plan has nothing on Garp*, he reflected ruefully, trying hard not to feel as if he was betraying his personal hero for thinking that.

Eventually, the conversation shifted to what Melissa, Mei, Shoto and Tenya had been up to. Here, Tenya stiffened further, if that was even possible, and his hand began to chop so hard it became a blur, a sure sign to Izuku of his friend being uncomfortable or annoyed about something. That something became apparent when Mei bluntly said, "The Ship's Chief Gunner, the officer in charge of all the guns, has a tongue on him that has to be heard to be believed. He curses every third or fourth word, and curses other people most of the time he's talking. It's bizarre and irritating to deal with. Worse, he refuses to let me modify any of the guns!"

"Not until you've submitted plans, Mei-day," Melissa groaned, having woken up at some point and begun to eat again and using a new nickname for the pink-haired scientist the Chief Gunner had given her twenty minutes into their shift. "It's not that big a deal. His cursing is really bad, though, and I don't think I will ever stop flinching when he curses someone out. But the gun crews seem to just take it in stride. It's weird."

Shoto helped to explain this by giving the group a few examples, causing blushes and shocked faces among their fellows, before he reminded Mei, "And at least you seemed happy enough to know there would be live gunnery practice three times a day, once per shift."

"Well, yeah, but only one gun multiple times," Mei complained. "And I won't be the one leading the gun crew. We're all working like regular seamen down there."

"That's only for now, Mei," Melissa snorted. "Garp and the rest of the officers are testing us all in various ways until they know where to slot us in more permanently, remember. You, Tsuyu and Kirishima are all going to be assigned to work with the ship's carpenter eventually. We're only all assigned to the gun deck right now because there isn't enough work for the ship's carpenter just now to want extra hands."

Mei grumbled, while Kyoka snickered. "That, and your little rant this morning, might have convinced them all that you shouldn't be involved in any repairs or anything else, lest you decide to add stuff, Mei."

Izuku let the gentle ribbing of their most demonstrably chaotic friend go on for a few minutes before bringing up a more serious topic, his voice low so it wouldn't carry away from their table. "I have to ask, has everyone had time to, well to think more about what Melissa and I told you about what Miss Hana told us about the Marines?"

All of the kids sobered a little, although Tsuyu simply smiled, elbowing Izuku in the side. "As important as that information might be, I'm sorry that your date was interrupted. Who knows where it could've gone, since Melissa is American and all, kero."

"I will have you know that the idea that Americans are any quicker to initiate 'fun times' on dates is a vile calumny," Melissa said, very noticeably not denying that it had been a date even as Izuku opened his mouth to do that very thing. She smiled at him, an almost challenging glint in her eyes which caused him to blink, then stared down at his meal as he felt a blush suffuse his features.

From across the table, Momo looked on at this little moment, feeling something stirring within her. It wasn't quite annoyance of anything similar, but it wasn't altogether happiness for her friends either. *How odd. I should be happy the two of them are becoming close, yet somehow, while a part of me is, I am not quite there just yet.*

Next to her, Kyoka also watched, one eyebrow twitching a little. She knew she was jealous, but wasn't quite certain why. After a few seconds, she decided to put it down to the fact that Izuku and Melissa at least were getting together, whereas she had yet to work up the courage to talk to Momo about even going on a date, let alone anything else like Melissa at least seemed to be pushing for. *But I'll do it, by God I will! She thought. Before we leave the next island for certain.*

In an effort to push away her oddly conflicted emotions, Momo robotically chewed her food, her face locked in a rictus of concentration as she considered the remarkably thorny topic. "I think there is one aspect that I agree with Tenya's initial response to this 'Hana' woman about. The young lady almost certainly had her own reasons to pass on such... uncomfortable truths."

Given how Melissa and Izuku had questioned the midshipman sent to find them about the Tenryubito and been told something about them, all the teens understood that yes, Hana had been telling at least some of the truth about the World Government and its actions. "Further, we have yet to deal with any Marine who I wouldn't call a good person. Even some of the officers aboard the ship who acted a little..."

"Perverved, you can use the word, Yaomomo," Kyoka supplied. "I think only one out of every five men aboard doesn't stare at your chest as you walk past, girl, and I bet it's the same for Melissa and Mei." She scowled before reluctantly going on. "More seriously, we can all agree that Garp is a good man at least, so was Jonathan. But good men have served bad systems in the past. Hell, the marines as a whole might be a good organization tied to a cruel government, and it wouldn't exactly be unusual in human history."

“True,” Melissa said, to both aspects of what Kyoka had stated. She had also noticed a few looks in her direction, and from men far closer to her father’s age than anything she thought of as in the datable range. *Not that I’m interested in anyone but Izuku right now.* “And it’s not as if she gave us any really actionable intelligence. We found out that some of the things she said were on the nose, but... Well, there’s only so much that even Vice Admiral Garp could do to keep a system like a world-spanning government clean of corruption, especially if that corruption is built in from the beginning, like it was here. I think we just need to keep our eyes open for now. At the moment, we’re just not in a position to do anything one way or another.”

“Indeed. I refuse to believe that the entire world government is built on corruption, as this Hana woman said. Surely, no self-respecting government could ever be so, and certainly, while there are rules and notations within the Marine handbook about the correct response to being in the presence of a Tenryubito, those are very minor things in the great scheme of things. I think that Hana simply ran into the dark side of certain members of that privileged society, and assumes that the rest of them are similar,” Tenya said, making a chopping motion with one hand. “It would be the same thing as assuming all politicians are corrupt because you met one governmental employee who was such.”

Thankfully, he was also keeping his voice down. The night before, his initial response to the idea that the Marines might not be the paragons of heroism they all had thought they might be had been quite a bit louder.

Watching him, Momo wasn’t certain if Tenya truly believed that, or if he just believed it because he so enjoyed the structure that they had already been introduced to in the Marines. Tenya had always struck her as someone who wanted that kind of structure, who craved rules, ordinances and so forth to follow, and possibly to also call out others on, as uncharitable as that thought might be.

“That could be, and I think it is clear to everyone that Hana might have an ulterior motive for approaching us personally on top of her own axe to grind with the government. One that Hana only hinted at when she spoke of being intrigued by where we came from. I think we just need to be aware that this world isn’t as black and white as our old world tried to appear. I admit that since we already swore oaths, we might well be stuck for a time, but we need to keep our eyes open, stay together come what may, and never agree to do anything that goes against our own concepts of right and wrong.”

Izuku nodded firmly, his expression so determined for a moment that all of them were both taken aback and impressed to varying degrees. “If the Marines are corrupt, we’ll just have to gain enough rank to start changing things. And if we run into corruption, well... a hero is someone who runs in regardless of what’s happening to help. That’s what All Might said to me

once, and if something evil or reprehensible is going on in front of me, I won't hesitate to act regardless of the rules."

The rest of the table nodded at that, although Tsuyu and Tenya looked a little torn about it. Tsuyu was very much a black and white person in general. Breaking the law, whatever that law might be, was wrong. At least that was how she saw the world. Whereas Tenya believed in following the laws, and now the Marine regulations were the same thing as being a good person. However, neither of them was blind to the fact that this was not the world they had come from, and things here might work differently.

The conversation shifted from that point to more about what they would be doing aboard ship, the accommodations and so forth. The girls had been given the first mate's quarters, as Bogard had been left behind on Elena, and there was no place for women anywhere else aboard ship. Some of the other officers had their own rooms set up in the quarter gallery at the stern of the ship, like Garp, Roland and the others, but midshipmen like the teens and noncoms were bunked inside the gun decks along with the common seamen.

From there, Kirishima and the others went into greater detail about the training and what to expect while out on the main deck before Izuku was forced to his feet by a shout of "Third watch, you're on deck! Report to Sail Master Whitman!"

Without Izuku and Melissa, the conversation split up into different conversations across the table, although soon, exhaustion returned to those who had been forced to take up the challenge of Garop's insane training plans. Even the three injured girls were tired, having been sent running from one part of the ship to another on various tasks.

After heading into the head, and as Kyoka listened for any footsteps or anything else, taking very quick showers, the quartet of girls returned to their quarters. There, three hammocks had been set up in the small area over two bunk beds.

It hadn't exactly been a luxurious area for even one individual before this. The Hound was a fighting vessel after all, and despite having a quarter gallery in the first place, the majority of the vessel had been designed to fight and see its crew through the worst the Grand Line could offer, even Garp's quarters as a flag officer. In point of fact, the majority of the cannonball delivery system went through that area, the source of the space taken out of the stateroom that Mei and Melissa had noticed when they reported to Garp that morning.

Thus, even his first mate's room had been noticeably small. Small enough for Momo to remark that it was smaller than her closet back in the mansion she'd lived with her parents in, something that had all the other girls look at her somewhat askance for a few moments the night before. It was remarkably easy for the rest of them to remember that the bubbly, outgoing and altogether down-to-earth girl had been born into Money, with a capital M. Not

that this mattered overmuch in their new lives, admittedly, something Kyoka had pointed out at the time.

Now, Kyoka sighed faintly, staring at the hammock that she had been assigned the night before. Although in this case, being assigned to it meant that she had simply lost the first round of rock, paper, scissors, as had Mei and Melissa. “I don’t suppose we could play Jan-ken-pon every night for who gets to sleep in the hammocks, could we? Because I gotta say, I did not like that last night.”

“Oh, I’ll take one,” Momo said with a laugh, almost bouncing in place. “I’ve always wanted to see what it was like sleeping in a hammock, and I was actually quite a bit put out that we didn’t need them on Wayward Journey.”

“Are you sure?” Melissa asked hesitantly. “I’ve tried to sleep in a hammock occasionally, mainly in the summer when it’s so hot out you didn’t want to do anything but laze about, but it isn’t actually all that easy.”

“I’m sure. You can have my bed, Kyo-chan,” Momo said, before she began stripping off, much to the shocked chagrin of the other girls. Admittedly, this wasn’t the first time they’d had to change clothing in close proximity with one another, but Momo had **very** little body consciousness to her.

She wasn’t quite an exhibitionist, at least, Kyoka didn’t think so. But she certainly didn’t care if the other girls were watching, which, for the purple-haired girl, was something like heaven and hell in real time. Heaven because she got to stare at the girl, who Kyoka knew she was falling in love with, and hell because she had to hide she was doing so and control her blush at the same time.

Soon, her regular seaman’s pantaloons and uniform had been laid aside and even folded, and there was a flash of creation energy that covered her body from neck to ankle. “If anyone else wants some nighttime clothing to change into, tell me. We’ve brought aboard enough luggage to make one extra set of clothing each not seem that unusual, and I know none of us bought anything for nighttime wear. I already made one for Meli-chan.”

“Um, could I get something like what you’re wearing, kero?” Tsuyu asked, gesturing to the outfit that Momo was now wearing. It was a loose skirt-like thing, but it basically covered her from neck all the way down. It was loose, yes, but it didn’t seem too loose to move around in, and it was paired with equally loose pants you could barely see underneath it baggy ones that made their bodies seem remarkably un-sexual for a moment.

Which was a very good sign for the others.

Soon, all of them had a similar sleeping outfit, albeit in different colors. Tsuyu was given a light and dark green one, while Mei got a pink and red one. Kyoka even got a dark green with dark purple highlights pair to match her hair, which caused Kyoka to blush even as she reminded Momo that she needed to be careful about such things.

But thanks to how much experience she had in this field, Kyoka was able to shake off her bisexual yearning and ask Momo to Create something she had been thinking about a lot: Pens. "I can come up with a way to explain what they are, but I think that introducing them would be a great idea, especially aboard ship when any sudden movement might ruin a report or whatever you're writing. I had to redo several of the reports that Roland had us write up to show us how to do proper After Action Reports because of blotting and messing up my writing. It was frustrating as hell. "

"Hmm...come up with a way to explain what they are first, and then I will create as many pens as you want," Momo said cheerily, pulling herself up into the hammock, only to realize that only having one working arm made the task exceedingly difficult. With her shoulder so messed up, Momo's arm had been strapped to her chest, which she had removed prior to the earlier shower and had just redone after changing out of her clothing. An act she had several days to get used to doing with only one arm, unlike climbing.

Seeing that, Mei and Kyoka hurried forward to help. Kyoka wasn't much help, being the least physically strong of the girls, even Melissa, but Mei was almost as strong as Momo had proven to be several times in their adventures, and was able to nearly lift Momo into the hammock on her own despite grimacing at the pain in her arms. "Ooh, as payment for helping you here, I demand some of that lotino stuff for sore muscles. Are you sure you are happy with sleeping in one of these things? I am thinking about building a pair of bunkbeds myself, but even then, one of us will still be in a hammock."

Momo thanked her profusely, then shifted for a bit, her clothing now squished to her person in such a way that Kyoka had to look away, pulling her hand out from under the taller woman's body with some reluctance. *Oh my god, was that a nipple I just felt!? Those shifts aren't nearly as thick as they look.*

Once the taller girl was ensconced on the hammock appropriately, she looked quite comfortable and said so. "I must say that without my quirk's side effects being in this might be very uncomfortable, but as I don't toss and turn most of the time, I should be fine."

"No, you don't toss and turn, you pretend to climb trees in your sleep," Kyoka teased, causing Momo to pout.

A moment later, however, a small jar popped out of the hand on her uninjured arm as she held it out to Mei. "There you are, Mei. That should look relatively normal enough to not get any of the orderlies interested, but it will also deaden your muscles to a certain degree."

"You're the best boobs," Mei cheered as she reached for the jar, only for Momo to pull it away.

"Yaomomo," Momo stated firmly. "You are not going back to that horrid nickname, Mei, or else you'll be getting nothing from me, are we clear?"

Mei pouted while Tsuyu, who had already gotten comfortable in her bunk, and Kyoka both chortled. Still, Mei agreed, and she was given the bottle, whereupon she proved that Momo wasn't the only one of the girls without any body shame to her by stripping out of her uniform and beginning to rub the ointment in.

Surprisingly, Kyoka found herself looking away, embarrassed rather than intrigued. Mei had a great body, indeed, all of them did, but Kyoka didn't find herself as attracted to Mei as she was to Momo. The sight of Mei's chest, drooping slightly under its own weight but full and bouncy, didn't attract her eyes nearly as much as Momo's chest, larger still but almost inhumanly perky and firm, had.

Tsuyu also looked away, catching Kyoka's eyes as she did. The only slightly taller purple-haired girl looked away quickly from Tsuyu's gaze, much to her amusement. *I wonder when it will... ah, there it goes*, the frog-like girl thought, watching Kyoka's expression shift as she realized that Momo had taken the hammock directly above the bunk that she had slept in the night before. Directly above Kyoka's bunk now, in other words. *Hahaha, it might be a bit mean to think it, but watching Kyoka become a lesbian disaster when interacting with Yaomomo is always funny.*

Ignoring the fact that none of the other girls were able to look at her right now, Mei talked about her plans for the cannons aboard the ship as she rubbed the salve into her muscles. She was interrupted by a shout from above on the main deck and the roaring of a group of monsters.

All the girls looked at one another before Mai stated bluntly, "Better them than us, right?"

A second later, Izuku's voice bellowed, his voice loud enough to be heard clearly despite the intervening pair of decks. "Aim for the eyes, the eyes! Those seaweed tentacles regenerate!"

"Okay, no, I'm checking out now," Kyoka muttered, pulling her eyes away from Momo's rear where it had pressed into the hammock above. "Damn Grand Line nonsense."

Snickering, Mei got into her bunk over Tsuyu's bunk, leaving the central one, the one nearest the door, for Melissa when she returned the next morning. Once everyone was ready, Tsuyu reached out with her tongue to grab the lantern off its hook near the door, pulling it to her and blowing out the wick before hanging it up on a hook set in the outer hull by her side.

"A brief reminder, ladies, it'll be up to us to make sure Mei does actually sleep when off duty. I don't think we can count on the boys to do it while aboard ship like this, kero," she teased.

Two groaning replies and a shout of "Hey! Sleep is for the weak!" were her answer to that, and Tsuyu snickered a bit in the darkness. *Yep, never a dull moment with this group.*

OOOOOOO

As the ship sailed on, the group of dimensionally displaced teens fell into their new rotations with varying amounts of difficulty. Melissa found it incredibly hard to sleep during the day until Momo created an eye mask and headphone set for her that would block out the noise and light. Thankfully, much like the nightwear she had created the second night out from Elena,

Among the boys, despite not being on duty at night like Izuku, Shoto had the same issue with sleeping in the loud, busy confines of the gun deck and was completely unable to solve it. Not even after one of the other seamen came up with the idea of giving him a mask himself. "It ain't as fancy as your blonde friend uses, but it should do the job."

That phrase, of course, told the girls they were right to keep Momo's Creation powers limited even in their own room. Several seamen worked as orderlies to clean up the officers' rooms, and they gossiped a great deal. They answered to the Purser, who ran the galley and the orderlies on the Hound, while also being in charge of making any agreements with locals that needed to be made on islands the marines visited. Momo, Tsuyu and Jirou had met the man while running around the ship for Roland and found the man, whose name was Mr. Crawley (he insisted on the Mr. unlike the other officers) somewhat jolly and lazy-seeming, but Momo could tell there was a brain behind that act.

Because of his ongoing issues with getting enough sleep, as the days went on, Shoto got more and more grumpy and annoyed. But Garp and the other officers were unwilling to bend on this point. As a Midshipman, regardless of his Devil Fruit, Shoto needed to do his time sleeping with the seamen before he could be allowed the luxury of even the smaller officer's quarters, which were shared by the Sail Master, Purser and Gunner. That was one of the rules, and a way to semi-haze young reefers that all new recruits needed to go through.

The others were having similar hazing issues. Bits and pieces of clothing misplaced, food that was a bit off, being sent on snipe hunts for people or items throughout the ship that didn't

exist, being forced to climb up and down the sails randomly, and so forth. It was a way to test the boundaries of the kids and their ability to go along to get along, in a way that wasn't altogether pleasant but wasn't painful either.

While Izuku and the other teens who weren't wounded labored under the demands of Garp's personal training alongside all the other training the teens and the rest of the sailors had to do during their off-watch hours, Momo and Kyoka found themselves getting along quite well with Gregory. Tsuyu's deadpan humor and go-getter attitude had similarly made her a hit with the surgeon, so the first day's split had become permanent.

Roland was astonished at Kyoka's ability to feel the wind and subtle shifts in the current through her earjacks, and after having explained what to look for in those terms better than Kyoka had learned previously, she was better able to understand what she was feeling, which was a great achievement. Meanwhile, Momo's ability with mathematics and memorization meant that she could handle any navigational tasks, complete with creating maps.

On the fourth day, Gregory decided that he was going to put Kyoka in for Kenbunshoku training. "Luckily, I can start you down that road myself. I'm barely decent at it, and I wager that with your Devil Fruit helping you along, you might pass me eventually. But I can at least start you on that road."

"Kenbunshoku? What's that, Sir?" Kyoka asked.

"It is a way to sense the world around you through your basic understanding of that world and your own willpower. That's about as simple an explanation as I can give you." Confused as the two girls gave him, he smiled, closing his eyes for a brief moment, then pointed down. "Your friend Tsuyu is helping out in the medical wing at the moment, and a crewmate just arrived with a pair of broken fingers from the gun deck."

"How can you know that?" Momo blinked, leaning forward excitedly.

"That would be Kenbunshoku. Another crewmate just arrived from the same accident. They were the crew on live fire training, and your friend Tenya was the one to get both men to the infirmary so quickly." He smiled at Momo. "Why don't you go and see if I was right?"

It turned out he was, and Momo had hastened back from the med bay, shaking her head in bemusement as she stared at the officer while speaking to Kyo-chan. "He was right. Tsuyu was helping set the first man's two broken fingers as I got there, while the surgeon was seeing to the second patient. Tenya was even in the room waiting for the report on them."

"Like I said, Kenbunshoku is the ability to sense the goings-on around you. I'm not all that good at using it in a real fight; I'm better at sensing changes in the world, as befits my task as navigator. But others can actually use Kenbunshoku in battle. I can only do that on a small

scale, but others could use it to avoid attacks from entire crowds of people, or even, I have heard it said, predict the attacks from a crowd of people to the point where they would be able to anticipate where those people would be and attack ahead of time.”

“And you think I can learn this?” Jirou asked skeptically. “It sounds like something that would take a lot of time and effort.”

“Time and **pain**. There’s no better way to learn Kenbunshoku when your body is actually in danger, although obviously, we won’t push it to that extent. Just make it so that you don’t want to be hit again,” Gregory drawled. “That and I think some Rokushiki training for both of you. You in particular would do a great job with Shigan, Jirou.”

“I believe Commodore Jonathan spoke of those. His ability to move through the air was a technique called... Geppo? He mentioned there were certain defensive techniques, I think it was?” Momo mused.

“Exactly,” Gregory nodded. “Geppo is the ability to actually bounce off the air itself. I can only do it for short amounts of time these days, nor am I all that good at Soru or Rankyaku, anymore the speed technique and an air-based cutting attack. There’s a lot of crossover from the training that can be applied from one technique to another, and those three in particular, but my legs aren’t what they used to be. I am quite good at Kami-E, which allows your body to become as limp as a piece of parchment in the wind, able to dodge around any attacks just by the impetus from the air pressure of those attacks. And then there is the last technique...”

Roland looked at the two girls, then speculatively around before motioning the girls to wait for a moment. He was soon back entering his office with an empty barrel of water over one shoulder. He set it down, then gestured to the side. “You’ve mentioned a time or two you can use those earjacks of yours to attack. Do so on this.”

Grimacing, Kyoka nodded. Normally, when she used her earjacks on people, the hole somehow... disappeared after she pulled her jacks out, as if her jacks didn’t in fact do anything, but she could still use them to jolt anyone she stabbed with sound waves from her heartbeat or something else she had plugged in. However, she had recently learned how to leave wounds when she plugged into someone. Looking back on it, Jirou thought that it was all about intent. She had to need or want to hurt the person she stabbed permanently, as she had against the pirates on Elena, in order to override how her jacks usually worked.

At the moment, though, that didn’t matter much as the barrel wasn’t a person.
Thankfully. I’m still not certain I could do that on command. I sure haven’t left any permanent marks on any of the guys who’ve stared at any of the girls too long.

With an inner snort at her meandering thoughts, Jirou launched one of her earjacks forward. Stabbing into the side of the barrel, she pulled it out quickly, leaving a nice little hole where the metal tip had disappeared into the wood.

“Very nice, and in the right place, that could do a tremendous amount of damage. However, you could also learn to do the same thing with your fingers. It’s not easy, and it is in fact quite painful on the fingers to learn, but our sawbones is quite a good one,” Gregory snickered as he used the derogatory name for a ship’s surgeon before holding up a finger.

As the two women watched, he brought it down hard into the side of the barrel, stabbing through and pulling it back out, looking none the worse for wear, but leaving a far larger hole than Jiro’s earjacks had. “This is one that I have perfected over time, along with my Kami-E ability. I am a fist and dagger fighter, mostly, so I can teach you this technique easily enough.

Roland paused, then snorted. “Well, easily for me anyway, not so much for you. And if either of you wants to learn how to fight with daggers, I can also give you some training in that as well. Just be aware that with such things, the phrase, no pain, no gain is very literal.”

Meanwhile, Mei was in another argument with the Chief Gunner about the need to change the cannons. This had become somewhat of a daily occurrence, but this time, the changes Mei was proposing weren’t being welcomed as. “Come on! What’s the point of having so many cannons if not one of them can do a lot of damage! Cut down on the number of cannons, built or whatever larger caliber guns to replace them and hit your enemy harder! Look, it’s not that hard, I even drew up some diagrams!”

Grumbling in frustration, the Chief Gunner shook his head. Yama was another middle-aged man. He wore a simple gunner’s mate uniform and was a large, powerfully built man on the scale of Gasparde and Garp, with short, cropped red-grey hair and the marine insignia tattooed on his cheek along with several other tattoos visible on his bare forearms.

He barely glanced at the designs before he shook his head. “I’m not fuckin’ arguing that your ideas sound damn interesting, Mei-day. They do. I’m not even fuckin’ arguing with your idea that hitting a Davy Jones’ be-cursed enemy with one larger fuckin’ shell’d be barnacle-blasted better than several smaller ones. Greater range of larger be-damned cannons is something that we’ve fuckin’ known for more than a few cursed decades. But I’m going to need to sit down with a dedicated fuckin’ boat builder to make sure that these cursed changes don’t mess up the ship’s fucking seaworthiness, or with the interior damned construction.”

In battle, the interior of the ship mattered a good deal, especially with wooden ships. Not so much in terms of keeping the total ship intact, but in keeping damage contained, along with protecting the magazines. Sinking a wooden ship was extremely hard with just

cannonballs unless you had excellent aim to hit below the water line, or worse, could cause a fire aboard the ship. Fire was the nightmare of all sailing vessels. “Remember, this bleedin’ ship’s already got a few fucking unusual bits and bobs to it thanks to who our damned commanding officer is. There might not be room for more.”

Tenya forcibly stopped his arm from chopping as he listened from nearby. Listening to Yama talk had proven to be a very trying experience for Tenya, but he noticed that the man’s cursing was actually at a far less noticeable pace than when he addressed the seamen or other midshipmen. *Is this, is this perhaps Yama’s best attempt at being polite because Mei is a girl?*

It wasn’t. Yama didn’t care about gender, and indeed, there was a joke going around among the lower rankers that he liked his cannons a little too much. But Mei hadn’t yet gotten on Yama, so he was less inclined to curse her out save on general principle.

“If we take out the head and a portion of the sleeping quarters, then—”

“Mei, are you listening to yourself?” Shoto asked, reaching out and gently shaking Mei by the shoulder. “Do you really want to go without showers? And do you really think the rest of the seamen aboard ship would willingly have even less space for themselves?”

“I would! Having grease and gunk on ya only shows you’ve had a good day! Heck, we could have you men hot bunk, that way we could use more room on at least two of the three gun decks, and there, the problem’s solved! And if you need a shower, just jump off the ship.”

“Hah, the water of Davy Jones’ realm’s not good for gettin’ really clean, and you’d best fuckin’ remember that you and most o’ your friends are all Devil-cursed Fruit users anyway. You wouldn’t be able to use the ocean water for bathing in, ya blisterin’ buffoon,” the Chief Gunner’s mate said, shaking his head. “Now, get to work, or by the hairs of me scrotum, I’ll have yer all muckin’ out the fuckin’ bilges!”

Throughout the time aboard, Garp had been true to his word in that he concentrated almost exclusively on training Izuku and Kirishima during the afternoon. Admittedly, he gave Tenya, Melissa, Mei and Shoto some exercises to do during their own training time, but that was about it. In what Momo called “a case of pragmatic favoritism,” Garp concentrated on the two whose combat styles were based around their Devil Fruits, or quirks, depending on who was nearby, which were most like his own.

Because of this, Izuku began to see a marked improvement in the percentage of One For All he could use without any pain in himself every day. Within four days of Garp’s training, he could call on up to twenty-five percent with difficulty for short amounts of time without exhausting himself or hurting anything, although he had yet to go to bed in the morning without being so tired he fell asleep right away regardless of the sun streaming in wherever it

could. Meanwhile, Kirishima showed something interesting a few days into the trip after being pummeled enough times by Garp. He unlocked a second, evolved form of his Stone Body quirk.

This second form was even more defensive in nature, transforming his normally smooth stone form into a jagged series of crags and shafts of stone. This meant that hitting him would actually be exceptionally painful for most people to attack him, shattering weapons and cutting hands, even Garp's.

Of course, this just made the massive man laugh. "Hahaha, great! Now I'll be using air strikes on ya from now on. That's a step up from the amount of strength I've been putting into my hits on ya before this. Try not to die."

All in all, the time aboard the ship was going relatively well. So well that only Izuku and Melissa, assigned to work with the Sail Monkeys at night, knew how hard the ship was pushing itself. Normally, at night, the ship would be at half sail or even anchor, but Garp wanted the ship to get to the area of the Grand Line where the Dead End Race had been organized as fast as possible. With Roland's help, he had the ship moving at a brisk pace regardless of whatever weather they ran into. It cost them in terms of sails being torn from sudden changes in the wind, forcing Whitman to replace all three topgallants once each and the mizzen sail, pulling them out and hanging new canvas, setting aside the torn canvas for repairs.

Several ropes had to be replaced, too, and the rudder at one point had stopped responding in the middle of the night, but the Ship's Carpenter had seen to it quickly. He had gone over the side and had used a small electrical light set in a watertight cage to see the damage in order to repair it quickly. Something that had Mei salivating the next morning, as it showed a higher degree of tech than nearly anything else aboard.

On the sixth day out from Elena, Tsuyu and Momo were in the medical bay, getting their wounds checked out. Kyoka had been cleared for full duty a day before, the gash across her upper chest having healed relatively well. The ship's surgeon was an elderly gentleman, even older than Garp, named Quillo. He was rail thin and looked almost emaciated, along with a certain amount of frazzled appearance that gave the man a very mad scientist look. Yet he was almost gentle with the two girls and seemed incredibly knowledgeable.

"I'm sorry that we can't do anything for the scars on your back, Tsuyu," he murmured, shaking his head as he gestured the girl to put her uniform back on. "Those are going to be quite nasty, I'm afraid. Still, I think another week and a half or so of half-duty will see you right. We'll remove the stitches in a few days, but keep you on half-duty until then, and I want you to report to me every day for a week after we remove the stitches to make sure that there's been no issues. The back is a tricky place for injuries, what with everything it has to shoulder."

Tsuyu respectfully chuckled at the dry bit of medical humor, even though she didn't really get it all that well. "Understood, surgeon, thank you, kero."

"Good. You'll be working here today, so I suggest you get some stretches and whatnot in now. We're liable to be heading into combat soon, and we'll need all hands for that." The surgeon, whose accent sometimes reminded Momo of Italian for some reason, turned to the taller girl, whom he had examined and fit with a new cast before checking Tsuyu's injuries. "As for you, Momo, that cast should have finished hardening by now. Go through those motions I showed you now."

While she had no idea how the man knew that without looking at the timer nearby, Momo still obliged, getting up from the chair she had been sitting in, waiting for that signal. She squatted down first, then kicked out before twisting her body this way and that, showing a full range of motion and dutifully reporting only a bit of pain. The inside of the cast had been slathered down with some kind of local equivalent of the paste that Momo had made for Mei the second night out from Elena, and combined with the weeks it had been since her injury meant that while she couldn't, say bench press or lift heavy objects with her shoulder still messed up, at least could move around relatively well despite her still healing ribs.

She continued these movements for nearly a quarter of an hour under the surgeon's gentle instructions, his attention entirely on her shoulder, which was set into a portion of the cast and core. Having that cast fitted had been... troubling, but thankfully, the surgeon hadn't even looked at her bra-clad chest even once throughout the process. That had made Momo feel far more sanguine about submitting to a male surgeon, the first she'd ever had in her life, than Momo would have thought.

Eventually, Quillo finished his questions, then gently tapped the cast that the man had set around her stomach and chest, the cast releasing a dull thunking noise. "And what do you think of the feel of this, my dear?"

"It works sir, and fits far better than the one I got back on Elena," Momo reported easily. "I can't feel any chaffing or discomfort, and the paste is dulling the pain in my shoulder to a degree I haven't felt in a while." *Except for when I used my own*, Momo added mentally.

"You should've mentioned that to me when you came aboard. Still, you were already on half duties anyway, and I didn't detect any slowing down of the healing process. That special cast will let you relatively able to move around. You won't be able to do any core exercises, and you are still not going to be allowed to do any weight lifting, not even leg lifts. But you can start taking part in the endurance training that I know Garp will assign you this after..." the surgeon paused, frowning, looking up.

For a moment, the man gave off the same feel to the waiting Kyoka, who had accompanied Momo to the surgeon's office but remained silent up till now, of Roland when he used Kenbunshoku. *I suppose that I shouldn't be surprised that he has the same ability. Ugh, but I am not looking forward to the Rokushiki training,* Kyoka mentally lamented. *Still I wonder...*

Jirou got an answer quickly as Quillo shook his head. "Sly old Garp. I hadn't thought of that. Tsuyu, check those bags by the door." He reached into a pocket and tossed Tsuyu a small placard. "Make certain each of them have the stuff on that list. As for you two, I don't personally know your battle station at the moment, although if you want to make yourself useful here, that'll be good enough. Roland will be at the wheel."

"Actually, I think this is my action station," Momo said, shrugging her uniform back on heartedly.

"It's not mine. Lieutenant Roland told me he wants me near him during any battle." Kyoka shook her head, then, feeling greatly daring and knowing what Quillo's words meant, moved forward, hugging Momo and then, to cover that action, Tsuyu too. "Stay safe, you two."

Before Tsuyu and Kyoka finished their brief hug, a shout from on high echoed down, the man on watch amplifying his voice to be heard practically down to the third gun deck. "Sail ho! Sail on the horizon dead ahead, port and starboard."

Garp's voice was a bellow of joy and eagerness as he spoke on the heels of the other man's words. "Sound general quarters!! Roland, you have the wheel and the deck! All hands to battle stations!"

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Mei, Shoto and Tenya were already on the gun deck as part of their shift, where they were swiftly joined by Melissa running in from the forecastle. While normally she would be exercising in the afternoon, like it was now, her battle station was on the gun deck thanks to her scores with the rifle and the cannon practices she and Mei had been a part of over the past few days.

Swiftly, Mei joined one of the gun teams, sighting along the top of the cannon as the cannon rolled along its runner and out the opening gunport. Melissa was across from her on one of the portside guns, doing the same thing. Yama had allowed the pair to fit a few guns on either side of the ship with small rangefinders, which would allow them to better aim those specific guns at longer ranges. Those specific guns would, in turn, provide markers for the other guns around them.

The Chief Gunner smiled grimly at how well the two young women worked with their gun crews, pleased. He had put the pair through so many live firing exercises over the past few days that he was certain they knew what to do, and better, both girls had shown a very decent instinctual understanding of the mental calculations needed to accurately hit an enemy ship at sea. Yama then blinked, brows furrowing as he looked at Shoto. "What in the name of god's own shits are you still doing down here?"

"It's my billet, sir," Shoto said, blinking in surprise, having completely forgotten some of the things Garp had told the teens prior to assigning them to their sections.

"... Damn Garp! Did no one fucking tell you, reefer? In a fight, your DF is fuckin great for defense. Get up on the fucking main deck, and whenever you see rounds incoming, do somethin' about it." The older man muttered before going on in a more conciliatory tone. Yama then raised his voice, bellowing, "Do it now, you useless little bit of jetsam!"

As Shoto raced off, Melissa heard the snicker of another member of her gun crew. "Old Yama's got a reputation he's got to uphold," he said, giving her a wink.

Melissa just nodded back before peering through her gunsight again, making sure the rangefinder was aligned correctly. "How long is it normally from when we first spot enemy sails to when we engage?"

"That depends on if Garp wants to show off, is having one of his narcoleptic episodes, or... well... is just bored," the gun captain said, drawling the words. Gun captain was the title given to the seaman or midshipman in charge of a specific gun. Being assigned such a position was a sign of respect and trust from Yama, who had extremely high standards for that position.

Up on deck, Shoto found Izuku and Kirishima already there, both of them stationed to either side of the ship's starboard and port. At their feet were dozens of small cannonballs, which Shoto recognized as coming from the bow chasers. He had actually worked with those guns, which were called three-pounders, before.

Garp stood in the center of the deck near where the cannonball delivery system came up out of its special hatch, several regular-sized cannonballs at his feet. All around the area, seamen worked to better tie the ship's boats down or handed out muskets to the sail monkeys. *How the heck someone can climb a rope while having a musket hanging from their shoulder, I don't know.* Shoto was not a good climber, unlike several of his friends.

As he moved towards them, Shoto noticed something was different about the main deck from the time he had been out here helping to clear away snowfall from one of the frequent Grand Line storms that morning. "Something's different..." He mused aloud.

Garp guffawed, while Kirishima and Izuku both smiled, one a grin, the other a worried, tremulous thing. Shoto was not concerned. He knew his best friend's nerves would settle the moment the fight started. "Lad, do you think that someone like **me** doesn't have a reputation? My pennant is so well known, most Paradise pirates will flee on site. Hell, most New World pirates too, unless they're allied with one of the Yonko. I had Teuchi remove the dog's head and Whitman my admiral's pennant so all the pirate ships out there will think we're just a regular Marine galleon with delusions of grandeur."

As Shoto hadn't even noticed that Garp had indeed had a personalized version of the Marine pennant flying over the sales, which of course had the regular Marine sign on it, he just nodded at that, while Garp went on, his joviality diminishing a little bit. He raised his voice to be heard from bow to stern and even deep into the ship. "If we were trying to free an island, or just show the flag, running pirates off would've been enough. For that kind of thing, my dog's head and pennants would've worked."

He waited a tick until nearly all eyes were on him, even those of the other officers, before continuing, somehow giving the impression that he was staring back into the eyes of every man there. "But orders from on high means we ain't just here to see what we can do for the island the Dead End Race started at. If the pirates of this new age are getting so big for their britches that they think they can run the Dead End Race again, we need to remind them of the power of Marines. That means we're going to sink every pirate ship we can, boys."

He waited again, crossing his arms as Roland, Whitman, and the bosun all nodded, a visible response to the orders for the ship's log. "That means no quarter until they strike their colors. And very few pirates ever do, even if they're faced with someone like me, until their ship's been pounded a bit. It doesn't matter what kind of pirate crew we're facing. We sink every ship out here, and unless they surrender, we let Davy Jones sort them out. Understand?"

Izuku gulped at the implications of that, the hero in him protesting at the possibly thousands of people who were going to die in this battle. Looking at his friends, he saw most of the implications seemed to go over Kirishima and Shoto's heads. Or perhaps they didn't? Kirishima was the son of fishermen after all. Perhaps he had some naval men in his ancestry who had passed down how deadly ship-to-ship fights could be? As for Shoto, well, Shoto never seemed all that perturbed as to what happened to villains.

The rest of the seamen around them similarly had no such qualms; instead, they cheered in response. At the same time, one of the vestiges took this moment to speak up.

They didn't normally during the day. The vestiges seemed willing to allow Izuku the privacy of his own thoughts more often than not, even at night, except for some teasing about Melissa or one of the other girls, which was somewhat awkward. Especially since Hikage,

surprisingly, seemed oddly miffed that Izuku had not become attracted to Mei as he was to Melissa, or even Momo and Jirou, a fact that normally had him blushing in horrified self-recrimination whenever they pointed it out..

At the moment, the soothing voice of Banjo helped settle him down. Normally, he'd be the first to tease Izuku, but now his tone was the definition of calm professionalism. *"Easy there, kid. I'll admit that by the time I became a hero, the Quirk Wars were dying down, but it was still a far bloodier, deadlier time than your own. This world makes that look like a cakewalk. Just remember what you saw those pirates do on Elena. Most of the pirates you're going to face will be that sort, and if you don't put them down now, they'll continue to do worse in the future. Taking prisoners is always preferable, but when it isn't, putting them down rather than letting them escape is better."*

For a moment, Izuku still dithered internally, but with Banjo's words, he began to get over his pre-battle jitters. It wasn't, after all, his first life or death battle. *I wonder if it will get any easier?* When no answer from the vestiges was forthcoming, Izuku asked aloud, "What are our specific orders once battle is joined, sir?"

"Defense until me, Roland or Whitman tell you young gentlemen otherwise," Garp said, flicking one of these smaller cannonballs, that is a cannonball only the size of a normal man's fist, up and down in one of his massive paws with all the ease of someone normal doing the same with a bouncy ball. "Kirishima, you probably won't be worth much until we actually start boarding ships; you're not strong enough yet to throw around cannonballs like this old dog or Greeney here. But ya can probably get in the way of any cannons coming down on the main deck if you feel up to it."

"Yes, sir, and as for not being strong enough yet to throw cannonballs, I call that a goal to work toward, sir!" Kirishima said, grinning **maniacally**, causing Garp to laugh again.

"I like it! Shoto, I'll want pinpoint accurate blasts of ice, nothing too major, keep it in close. The more ships we can convince to come in and engage us in normal cannonball range, the better. If too many pirates out there see your ice powers, they'll think of that young brat Kuzan."

With those orders given, Garp looked up at the Crows Nest, where his chief sharpshooter was. *Mei might have better eyes than even Thomas, but she doesn't have the training yet to know what to look for.* "What are we looking at, Thomas?"

Thomas was the youngest officer aboard the ship, a Master's Mate learning the way of the sails under the Sail Master. He was a gangly young man only a year older than the other teens, but an introvert of the first degree, who barely made friends of any kind and preferred to be left alone with his rifle in the crow's nest for hours on end. Beyond Mei, however, he had the

best eyes aboard ship, and his observations were a good addition to Garp's Kenbunshoku, which of course couldn't pick out physical details like ship types or pirate flags, let alone the size of the various crews out there.

"I'm counting at least fifteen sails, with a few almost over the horizon. I can't make out if those are individual ships, or groups of them yet, sir," the man said, "I think we made the best time possible though, cap'n. Those ships haven't dispersed at all. They're only doing so now, with a few of 'em are peeling off to come our way. Three of them so far, with the rest continuing on their way. If we keep on this heading, we'll be in the thick of the pirates soon enough."

"That's what I like to hear!" Garp shouted back, crouching down in the center of the deck, and peeling off his officer's coat, tossing it almost negligently towards a seaman who caught it and ran inside the ship through one of the regular hatches. The three youngsters looked at him in surprise, and Garp snorted. "You don't think that Marines have a monopoly on good sharpshooters and so forth, do you? Hells, if this were happening in the New World, I wouldn't even bother trying this trick at all. With that many ships, there would almost have to be someone with Kenbunshoku, and it would only take one of them to know I'm here for the rest to start scattering. We have to stop them from doing so as long as we can."

Having heard about Kenbunshoku several times before this, the three young nodded and went back to tensely waiting for action to actually occur. At the speed that normal wind-powered galleons and so forth moved, that took a while, even when, as in cases like this, both sides were moving towards one another. The three pirate vessels that the lookout had spotted coming towards them closed the distance as the Marine galleon did, while on the horizon, more and more pirate ships became visible from on high.

Thomas kept on shouting out additional information, giving Garp and the other officers details on the ship types and various flags. None of which mattered at all to the New World veterans, but it never hurt to check even here in Paradise. A few ships intrigued Roland, though, and he ordered the sails trimmed to stay away from one, a massive barque with heavy artillery-style guns on its deck, while he marked out two more, both of which were fast sloops, with lots of chaser guns on their prows.

As he did, Izuku noticed that Jirou had joined the man by the wheel. She had a Den Den Mushi headset and seemed to be relaying orders to the gun crews, maybe? Or getting reports? Izuku didn't know. Her other earjack was twisting this way and that like a snake, as she held the staff that Momo had made her in one hand. At her waist, she had the vibro-sword, which she had not used since that first fight against the Trump pirates, strapped to her waist.

Jirou caught Izuku looking her way, and the two exchanged determined nods before turning their attention back to the incoming pirates.

By the time the first few pirate cannonballs began to land around the Marine ship, Thomas's overall count of enemy ships had gone up from fifteen to thirty-two vessels. "It's a whole damn fleet! No wonder the higher-ups want us to smash them so hard!"

"Hah! It just means we've caught a bigger catch than we thought, Thomas. Just get yer gun ready," Garp retorted.

"Bessy's always read fer action cap'n, you know that!" Thomas caroled back, to the whooping of the sail monkeys, until a growl from Whitman had them quieting down again.

By this point, the three pirate vessels that wished to engage the Hound had shifted away from one another, not coming in as if they were all under the command of one individual. *Izuku noticed this, his analytical mind coming to the fore for a second. If they had come in together, they might've attempted to do a maneuver that Kirishima once mentioned to me, I think it was called crossing the T? They would be trying to work it so that they would stop and form a line before our ship, timing it so they caught us right before we could turn to bring our broadside to bear, thus allowing the pirates to fire down the length of the ship unimpeded with their own broadsides.*

Instead, they were closing. Two were shifting around the marine ship's course to move past it on either side, while the third remained directly ahead. This put a lot of distance between the three vessels, which on the surface made some sense, but considering all three were frigates with only two decks of guns to the man-of-war's three, it didn't. Izuku muttered all that aloud before adding, "They're moving as if they are just as concerned about one another as us."

"They are, Greeny," Garp nodded to his words, startling Izuku out of his introspection, making him realize he had been muttering again. "Remember, few pirate crews are willing to ever work together unless one is able to force the other to comply. The Yonko are an exception to that, not a rule. Besides, setting our presence aside, only one crew can win the race and the beli prize."

On the heels of Garp's words, a bellowed command came from Roland, followed instantly by another from Whitman. The sales crews went to work rapidly, shifting the sails on all three masts so that the wind pushed the ship in a different direction.

This caused the man-of-war to slough around like a skier making a turn, just as the first cannonballs fired from one of the pirate ships began to land too close for comfort. A second later, Izuku could tell that the ship had gained headway for a second, moving faster through the water for a brief moment before again, at a second series of shouted orders, twisting to the portside this time. The canvas and the masts groaned above him, but this move had brought the starboard side guns to bear on the distant target of one of the enemy ships.

Down below, Mei's face lit up with delight as through her scopes and the rangefinder she saw the prow of an enemy ship. Without even consulting anyone else, not even her gun's captain, she lit the fuse on the Cannon, to the frustrated and horrified shouts of both that man and Yama.

That reaction faded a second later as her shot hit home on the enemy vessel right above the waterline. They were still too distant to hear it hit, but Yama could actually see the evidence of the shot a second later, and he shook his head, the fist he had been about to bring down on Mei's head turning into a slap.

"Communication, you fuckin' idiot, Mei-day!" He growled, while the gun captain snarled in anger near Mei, already barking orders to his crew. "This is not a one-woman fuckin' show. I don't care how good your DF makes your eyes; you work with the gun captain, or I will have your ass in the brig!"

Mei grumbled a little, touching the back of her head in annoyance before nodding. "Yeah, yeah, I'll remember."

"That's yes, sir, Gun Chief, sir!" Yama bellowed, shaking his head. The girl had skill, but she needed some real discipline smacked into her head.

The next second, the pirates started to get the range too. Two of the enemy ships had a few guns on their main deck, and while they weren't very powerful, unlike artillery shells, they could fire at an arc to attack other vessels from above. Their broadsides, on the other hand, were not able to find the range just yet. The yaw of the two ships made their broadsides miss, and watching, Izuku wondered if Mei's accurate shot had spooked them.

Nearby, Garp went to work, tossing cannonballs to slam them into incoming rounds. Shoto also got to work, with Shoto scowling in concentration as he sent out lances of ice, basically hurling spears of them up in a shotgun pattern into the air in groups of six or ten in the hopes of intercepting one of the cannonballs with enough impetus to make them explode.

The first few he missed entirely, his aim simply bad even with this shotgun-type approach, and the one he hit didn't have the decency to explode. Although it did veer off course slightly, which, at the range the battle had been joined, was enough to make a mess. However, it was on his side of the ship where the first cannonballs began to get through.

One of them plowed into and across the main deck without doing all that much damage, although it had smacked into a seaman's leg as it went, causing him to howl in agony as the bones of his leg were shattered. "ARGHHH!!!"

Another crewman raced to his side and began dragging him inside instantly, while another bellowed command from Roland sent the sale monkeys scurrying.

After giving his orders to his crew, Whitman paused. He was another old man, possibly a bit younger than Garp, but age had certainly ravaged him more than the larger flag officer. He was a thin man to the point of showing signs of starvation at some point in the past, pockmarked and tanned like old leather from the sun, with deep-set eyes but thin, dexterous fingers. "Repeat Order! Understand we are not furling the sails for combat?"

Garp opened his mouth to reply, but Roland beat him to it. "We cannot afford to lose way for a moment, Whitman. It'll be up to Garp and the rest of you to protect our sails!"

"That's my navigator!" Garp bellowed in laughter, picking up several cannonballs and hurling them into the sky to smash into not one, but seven incoming cannonballs from the enemy vessels, one after another.

As Izuku watched, the movements of the crew on the sails shifted the ship around just enough again to bring the port side guns to bear as the enemy shifted to do the same. He and Shoto both leaped to defend the ship, launching cannonballs and icicles respectively, but some cannonballs still got through.

Below, Melissa grimaced, having heard the crack of those cannonballs going home, having seen the damage one of them had done, smashing into the gun deck and sending one of the guns out of its rails to crash into two of its crew. But now, she, like Mei before her, had found the range. Better, the live fire exercises had made it second nature to the I Island native to calculate when to fire with the waves. "Chief Gunner! I've got---"

"Starboard, full broadside!" Yama interrupted her, shaking his head internally. Melissa at least knew how to work with other people, but she hadn't memorized any of the calls just yet. *Yeah, she might be the second-best climber amongst these reefers, but I'm for damn sure stealing her from now on from Whitman*, he thought, knowing already that Melissa's shout had come at the right time.

Every gun captain on the starboard lit the wick on their guns, bellowing orders to the men, who leaped away. Instantly, all of those guns fired, and the men swiftly began to work on tamping down the bags of gunpowder and the cannonball. It was a dance of choreographed movement that Melissa tried to keep up with, but five days wasn't enough time to really bring her up to true combat speed. She tried her best, though, as did Mei, and the gun captains on those particular guns knew it and didn't curse them out for how slow they were any more than they did the rest of their crews.

Looking through a gunport with a spyglass, Yama smiled grimly. That initial broadside had been devastating. With the range having closed a bit, and Melissa's rangefinder and calculations, every shot went home into the smaller pirate vessel, and not just on this gun deck

but the ones above and below. The enemy ship's portside nearly disappeared under smoke, fire and shrapnel before reappearing as the ship continued, lamed and wrecked.

Garp's vessel sailed on, with the broadside guns engaging with the other two ships one after another, twisting this way and then back. A moment later, the ship ahead of them was engaged again by the starboard guns, and it took significant damage. Not having turned enough to bring their own broadside to bear, the frigate was raked one end to another. It instantly began floundering, losing headway, joining the other ship that had already taken on water, yawing badly thanks to Mei's one shot that had already gone home.

Melissa looked up as the Chief Gunner shouted, "Starboard switch fuckin' guns!"

This was a command she knew, and she instantly left off work on the gun she'd been working on to run to the other side. With more hands helping, those guns began to fire more rapidly, although here, Melissa found herself getting in the way more often than not until one of the gun captains gently grabbed her shoulder and pulled her away.

The slightly older man, who looked almost boyish in comparison to the real officers aboard ship, smiled at her. "You show willing, Melissa, and that's good. But you don't know this dance yet. Get back to your own gun."

"Aye, sir," Melissa said, racing away before almost stumbling as she tried to turn in salute.

His face shifted into a snarl. "There is no saluting in battle, girl! Get on with you."

He shook his head as she went back to her gun, and Mei whooped in delight from another gun on the starboard, having just landed another blow, and also forgetting to inform anyone else **again**. *The two are a study in contrast*, he thought, just as two cannonballs got through the defense to slam home into the Hound further down and forward from his position.

Those cannonballs slammed into the side of the vessel, but a third got really lucky, smashing into and through one of the portholes on the second gun deck. The cannonball shattered the gun that it hit, sending splinters of metal and fragments of wood everywhere like a hail of stabbing spears.

Men went down screaming, and Melissa turned from where she had been about to reach her gun, racing over to a stand near the center of the deck where bags of gauze, strips of canvas and other things lay. Melissa had thought of them as this world's equivalent of a first responder bag, but now that was going to be put to the test.

"Hit! Port side, orderlies to the main gun deck!" Came the cry, taken up by many throats and passed on through the ship.

Up to this point, Tsuyu and Momo had been inside the medical bay, not doing much except helping with the one wounded officer from the main deck. However, as that shout reached them, the surgeon looked over at them both, jerking his head towards the hatch. “What are you waiting for? Get out there and do what you can! Triage, walking wounded back to their posts, and anyone else return here. You don’t give anyone mercy. I make that call on this ship, understood?”

Both young women nodded, that idea never having occurred to either of them, before racing towards the gun decks, hearing shouts from still more shots going home. The third pirate vessel was being captained much better than the other two, shifting itself to try and avoid the man-of-war’s broadsides. It got several blows in, even as Izuku, Garp and Shoto did their best.

This deep in the ship, Tsuyu and Momo had no idea about how the battle overall was going, and Momo found herself not caring at all as she entered one of the gun decks to find at least five men down, screaming in agony from splinters of wood and metal shrapnel embedded in their bodies. One man was clearly dead. *Living men have more head than that*, Momo thought, her mind almost going numb for a second at the sight.

Then she was racing forward. Grabbing at the pack over one shoulder, Momo went to her knees beside the wounded, doing what she could as Tsuyu did the same to one of the others nearby. And if Momo pulled out a little too many items like gauze and anesthetics from that bag, none of the men around her were in any mind to notice.

Up on the deck, Jirou frowned. Unlike what Izuku had thought, the Den Den Mushi on her head wasn’t connected to any of the communication devices. Instead, it was connected to a Den Den Mushi stuck on the prow near the bottom of the hull. She had wondered why Roland had ordered her to listen in for anything different moving through the ocean, but now she was hearing something there, a lot of large bodies moving through the water coming closer from a distance, their movements almost masked by the much closer sound of cannonballs splashing down into the ocean.

She reported this quickly, and Roland hissed. “Garp, Kenbunshoku, now! We might have real trouble coming our way.”

Scowling, Garp closed his eye for a second, then snarled and tossed another cannonball forward to impact an incoming cannonball. Staring over the side, he nodded. “Crap! We’ve got fishmen incoming!”

That caused numerous curses all around, while Whitman and Roland’s efforts finally maneuvered the ship to take the third vessel broadside on broadside. The better and more numerous guns of the Hound quickly won the day, but that enemy ship had hit them far worse than the other two had.

They hadn't lost headway yet, though. Now, as the distant pirate ships became visible from the deck, several other pirate vessels were already turning to engage them, firing at them from long range and missing. Very few gunners could hit at this range, even if their guns could fire that far in the first place. "Do you think you could freeze enough of the ocean to make them back off?" Garp asked, looking over at Shoto.

Shoto shook his head, the deck heaving underneath them from the waves. "No chance. I could maybe drive a spike of ice into the water towards a fishman if I saw him, but there's no way I'd be able to chill the water enough to cause them to back off, not even if they were cold-blooded, which I read they aren't. I could maybe boil it?"

Izuku interrupted, pointing down into the deck. "Wait a second, Mei! She was doing something when the Chief Gunner shot down her proposal the other day. She called them depth charges. Could they work?"

Garp scowled, his attention suddenly focused on the distance. In that distance, another vessel, even larger than their own, was coming over the horizon. It was a very oddly shaped vessel from what Izuku could see from the deck, which wasn't much, admittedly. It looked almost like a shoe from his perspective, but evidently not from the perspective of the lookout in the crow's nest. "Cap'n, we've got two incoming giants on one of their bike-sled things."

Izuku blinked. "Wait, what?"

"Ugh, giants, big bastards as big as a fifteen-story house or bigger and far more durable. As for the ship, they just make a vessel that's part bike, part sloop. They then just take turns peddling through the water. Damn it all, I'd best take them out before they close." With that, Garp pushed himself away from the gunwale, heading back to the top of the cannon distribution system. "We've got about a minute before those fishman hit us. Do something about them, crew! I don't care if it's one of that crazy pink-haired girl's inventions or not, there's at least thirty of them incoming."

Leaving his crew to ponder that, Garp pressed a special button on his cannon delivery system. Down below, a light blazed in the topmost gun deck, and several of the crewmen there skidded to a halt and shifted what they had been doing.

Meanwhile, Yama looked over at Mei, Garp's bellow having been heard even over the tumult of battle. *Most officers needed to work at that kind of thing*, he reflected dryly. *Garp just needs to use his version of an outdoor voice*. "You've been experimenting, ya flighty fuckin' reefer?"

Mei grinned evilly, then raced over to one of the munitions lockers. A munitions locker Mei shouldn't have access to, he noted idly, coming out with an armload of cannonballs that

looked as if they had been fused together at first. “Yep! They’re primitive, and you have to handle to get the length of the fuse right, or else it’ll explode below or above your target, but...”

The Chief Gunner took one of the devices from her, peering at it for a second. Mei had somehow melted the sides of the cannonballs so that they had fused together, and then tied their wick into one long twirl, which she had then protected with a glass and bronze container, which looked somewhat airtight to Yama’s eyes despite having a small hinged door on it. *Where did Mei-day get the bronze, or the glass, for that matter?*

After a second, he concentrated for a brief moment, grimacing slightly. Like some of the other officers aboard ship, Yama was a New World veteran and had some ability with Kenbunshoku. In fact, it was his best ability, but he wasn’t Roland or Garp. It still didn’t come naturally to him to use it, even though he had routinely used it up to this point in battle to aim some of his guns.

After a brief few minutes, Yama nodded, then quickly lit the fuse, marched over to one of the portholes, and dropped the device out the side of the ship. Mei followed him, dropping the other one.

Mei’s homemade IEDs barely went down a few meters into the water before exploding right as the first fishmen came within attacking range of the ship. The explosion itself didn’t do much to them. The fishmen weren’t in contact with the strange items. But depth charges didn’t need to come into contact with something to do a lot of damage. The explosions under the water created bow shocks throughout the water, and many of those fishman screamed, their eardrums ruptured, and their internal organs taking even worse damage.

“One-third wick, then a two-thirds wick, towards the prow, port and starboard!” The Chief Gunner ordered, and Mei hastened to obey, with one of the other gunners on the main gun deck hurrying over to assist, followed by Melissa. Four depth charges, all that Mei had made the day before when she had snuck away early from targeting practice, were flung out of the ship in the next few moments, wreaking havoc on the attacking fishman.

Only three of them got through, and the next moment, the chief shipwright dove into the water, followed by two of his men. Underwater, the shipwright found himself facing an irate fishman who screamed at him through the water, a massive trident in one hand, and a short sword in the other, blood streaming from his ears and mouth already.

That trident shattered as the man called on Tekkai, and another fishman was sliced in half as a water version of the Rankyaku lashed out towards him. A second later Foril grunted as another fishman came up behind, trying to bite into his shoulder. Tekkai saw those teeth unable to bite through, even as the man, a shark-type fishman, tried it’s best to grind his teeth into him, before a blow from one of the other Marines took it in the back of the head. It turned and

then found a dirk jabbing into its still open mouth, leaving the chief shipwright and the former trident wielder to duel it out in the water.

Even with the six techniques, this fishman was proving to be difficult. He was shifting up and around all the time, using his greater maneuverability to good effect, trying to keep the shipwright from gaining the surface to breathe.

Up on the main deck, Izuku hurled another cannonball up to intercept yet another cannonball coming in, before twisting and watching as one of Garp's larger-than-average cannonballs was hurled through the sky with such force that it created a black blast which rattled the entire marine vessel. "Minor Galaxy Throw!"

As he watched, one of the two Giants, monstrous individuals who were so large that he could actually make out features even from this far away, was struck straight in the head. That head simply disappeared, and then Garp was up and off the deck, shouting, "I'm going to deal with the other one before he tries to crash into us. The time for hiding is over, boys!"

Breathing a sigh of relief, Shoto stopped using his shotgun ice lance approach and raised entire arcs of ice to one side of the wounded pot marine vessel. Those mountains wouldn't last long, torn apart down below by the waves, but they lasted long enough to absorb and prematurely explode the cannonballs coming their way.

The man-of-war was too far away for anyone on the main deck to hear the shouts of dismay that the sight of the ice raised among the pirates, louder by far than the bellow of rage from the still-living pirate giant. The ice and the marine Admiral who normally used that element were far more frightening than the fact that a giant had lost his head. At least at the moment.

A second later, a flame from his other hand made the ice disappear just in time to allow that side of the ship to fire broadside into one of the pirate vessels as they kept on their course. Now they were among another group of pirate ships, mostly at long range still, but more than a few were trying to fire back, the man-of-war pushing into the 'race lane' so to speak.

On the other side of the vessel, Kirishima had not been doing so well. He had thrown himself in the way of a few cannonballs coming down from on high, and the impact had not been pleasant to say the least. But otherwise, he had been pretty useless. He couldn't intercept cannons coming in from lower down, and even catching those few cannons had really hammered his durability.

However, now Whitman looked over at him and Izuku before proving that he was truly one of Garp's crew. "Izuku! How far do you think you can throw Kirishima?"

“And I suppose how accurately?” Izuku mumbled under his breath, staring over at the enemy ships. He was still having trouble getting used to the ranges used in this world when it came to ship-to-ship combat, as most of the time when facing villains, it was up close and personal. Here, if it became up close and personal, one side or the other was losing already.

A whisper from Banjo in his mental ear had the green-haired youth nodding thoughtfully. “Get me some kind of rope or something, and I think I can do what you’re suggesting.”

“Manly!”

The pirates by this point had reacted to the sight of the ice and the sight of someone launching himself into the air, realizing that this particular marine vessel was far more toothsome than it had appeared even after destroying the first three ships that had come its way. However, the accurate fire coming from the Hound had already done its work. Pushing into the enemy’s loose formation with Izuku and Shoto defending them from fire near the prow had let them get into position to hammer several pirate ships.

Seven pirate ships within cannon range had been demasted to a certain extent, and one other was on fire. The large, strangely built giant vessel was still coming their way, but that halted now as Garp’s fist slammed into it, the impact shattering the ship and sending the giant who had been steering it skidding backward into the water. Here, the water wasn’t shallow enough for the giant to stand, but he was still a massive individual, and began to swim strongly, launching a punch up towards Garp, who reacted with his own.

A second later, Izuku, after watching Shoto use an ice wall again to protect from incoming fire, was handed a rope that had already been tied around Kirishima, almost to the point it resembled a rope vest. He looked at Kirishima, opening his mouth to say something, but Kirishima’s glare at him stopped his words cold. “Yes, I’m sure, this is the manliest ever! Do it!”

Shaking his head, Izuku moved to the most open area of the ship near the prow, and heaved. Kirishima had a second to wonder if maybe he really was certain about this before he was in the air, and was being whirled around like a yo-yo or something in Izuku’s hands as green lightning cascaded around his body. With Banjo whispering instructions in his ear, Izuku kept whirling for a few seconds, then released at a certain point, a shout of “*Three, two, one, now!*” nearly deafening him from Banjo telling him when to do so.

“YEEEETTTTTT!” Kirishima bellowed with a laugh as he was hurled up into the air towards one of the pirate vessels that was still underway, trying to get around the man-of-war that had, by this point, worked itself into the center of the racing pirate ships. “Hahahaha, yeah, manly! Second Form, Ultra Hard!”

Whether or not that pirate ship was trying to get away, or trying to then come back around to attack the Hound from behind, Izuku didn't know. Nor did it matter as Kirishima impacted the ship, slamming into its masts one after another, tearing through them to crash into the quarterdeck.

There, Kirishima pushed himself up, grateful that he had unlocked his second hardening form, and grimacing a little at some of the detritus underneath him, which bled red onto the rest of the wreckage. Steeling himself, Kirishima shifted into his more mobile first hardening form as he glared around the pirates, many of whom had already pulled up muskets or pistols and were firing his way. "Let's get it on!" He shouted, roaring forwards.

Back on the marine ship, it was only now that Roland gave him a bellowed order that many of the sail monkeys had been hoping for for a while. The masts hadn't taken any damage up to this point, although the foresail, topgallant foresail and main topgallant sail had been struck by cannons that had otherwise missed the ship fired from the sides. It was only a matter of time, especially with Garp away before the masts and yards took damage.

Admittedly, Shoto's ice walls were doing a magnificent job of defending the ship at this point, but even so, instinct and experience told them that the sails were simply just a giant target. Now, they were not necessary any longer. The fox was among the hens, and they had no need to power forward anymore.

"All hands, furl sales!" Roland shouted. "Drop anchors fore and aft. Gun crews fire at will!"

Down below decks, Yama had already anticipated that order, howling fire for a moment as the ship's anchors dropped and hooked in, as the sails were furled. The pirates all around them rained fire on the ship, but Shoto and Izuku protected the ship as best they could, and now, Jirou also began to help, along with Roland. One used finger bombs while the other used her staff to explode any cannonball she aimed at. They were soon joined by Whitman, who used Rankyaku to do the same thing, and then Yama, who used a brace of pistols, shooting incoming cannonballs out of the air before they could impact the side of the ship. Thus, even though more than a few shots landed on the Hound, there weren't enough coming in to badly damage the ship just yet.

The pirates were also not very careful with their fire. More than one pirate ship was struck by fire coming from their fellows, and a few outright battles began elsewhere because of it.

Now, as the man-of-war became a floating gun battery, each of the gun crews obeyed that order, with Yama turning over control of their guns entirely to the individual gun captains. The Chief Gunner had already done this for Mei's gun, after she returned to it from dropping

the depth charges, and the results of her incredible aim had been the one ship that Izuku had noticed had been on fire moments ago.

Now, every gun began to fire as best they could, targeting whatever enemy vessel they could.

Another shout went out, and Thomas and the sail monkeys armed with muskets fired from around the rigging, while others on the main deck began to grab muskets. Most of the men on the main deck couldn't fire just yet, but there were still some pirate ships coming close either to engage the Hound, trying to speed past it or grapple with it.

Since most pirate vessels had larger crews than a marine vessel, doing so made some sense, although Izuku was grimly certain that doing so with this crew would not go well for them. *And that's without me, Shoto and Kyoka to consider.*

Meanwhile, the while gun crews worked feverishly on their guns below, and Thomas began picking off officers and men onboard the pirate ships he could range on.

Standing near the mainmast, Shoto grimaced as two of the pirate vessels seemed to start to work together, hurling broadsides into his raised ice dome from directly aft, shattering it. Izuku, Roland and Jirou instantly went to work trying to deflect the cannons that came through, but the Marine ship still took several hits. Several smashed into the quarter galleries, demolishing them.

Then Garp, having finished off the second giant, landed on one of those ships. "BWHAHWHAHA!" his bellow of laughter could be heard even over the sound of battle and the distance, and for just a moment, it seemed as if most of the pirate ships almost shivered in fear, and more than a few of them started to work their riggings in such a way as to shift further and further away from the marine ship.

Kuzan, or Aokiji as the world knew him, did indeed have a reputation. But it paled compared to the Hero of the Marines, the man who had captured Gold Roger, the Pirate King. And even the most stupid and ignorant pirate crew knew about him.

Before any of the fleeing ships could get out of sight over the horizon, Garp was on them again and again as Izuku watched, smashing their masts, causing them to nearly capsize or otherwise wallow in place. One of them, a steam vessel, was simply sunk by Garp landing on top of it with such force that he nearly went straight through. The entire ship just came apart as if it were a small toy ship being smashed by someone performing a karate chop on it.

"Head back in the game, Midshipman Izuku!" Whitman shouted, leaping into the air and using a Rankyaku to hit six incoming commonballs in one go. "We're still on the clock! Garp will

slow them down or stop them from escaping one way or the other, then he'll go after those who already got out of our range. It'll be up to us to deal with the rest of this rabble."

"Right!" Izuku shouted, turning his attention back to his own efforts quickly.

Not all the pirate ships could be sunk, despite the little trick that Garp had run and Roland's navigational skills and his gamble with the sails to get in close to the majority of the racing pirate vessels before they realized how dangerous the Hound truly was. At least seven or eight pirate ships were able to get away over the horizon in one direction, but Garp was, as Whitman had said after them, zooming through the air in a way that almost made it seem as if he could fly.

Further, Garp's orders prior to the start of the engagement were clear. Every pirate vessel that had taken part in the Dead End Race was to be sunk, and then the island that had acted as its starting point would be investigated, as well as the one on the other end. A message had to be sent: the oceans still belonged to the Marines. Garp would send that message.

Meanwhile, around his vessel, ten pirate ships had already begun to sink, although they were still firing. Six others had been demasted either by Garp or by the precise gunfire of the Hound, but were otherwise still in the fight. Two more had simply exploded to join the ones that had already been sunk or had been caught on fire.

Now that the rest of the pirates were either unable to move or stuck at cannon range, Roland took stock of the battle for a second. "Yama, help me out, yeah?"

Once the guns had been given the weapons free order, Yama had joined the other officers on the main deck to help with the defense. Now he grimaced, but then he and Roland took a step back from that defense, pushing out their limited Kenbunshoku as best they could. After several minutes during which Jirou, Shoto, Whitman and Izuku worked overtime to take up the slack, the pair of experienced officers tried to feel out the overall battle.

When another pirate ship's guns fell silent, they opened their eyes, grimly satisfied even as the deaths they were causing continued to hammer into their psyches for a second. They were pirates, and unless a crew became known as followers of the piece main philosophy like Whitebeard, Jinbei or Shanks, they would get no mercy from Garp's crew.

That brief moment of examination was enough to tell them that the pirate crews were mostly close to breaking, and the defense of the ship was still going strong. Not enough for them to race off just yet, but they could send another one of their new Devil Fruit reefers out, Roland felt. "Midshipman Izuku, front and center!" he bellowed, lashing out with another finger bomb to destroy an incoming cannonball.

Izuku rushed over, and Roland pointed towards the ship that Kirishima had already invaded. "Do you think you can get yourself over there, lad?"

(*)After a second's trying to peer through the smoke and haze in that direction, Izuku hesitantly nodded, biting back what he had been about to say with some difficulty. "I... er... maybe, sir? So long as someone can point me in the right direction, the gun smoke is so bad I can barely see anything from this far away. And um, I don't think that my legs are going to be of much use after. I'll need to pump a lot of my Devil Fruit into my legs to get there."

"Hmm..." Roland hummed thoughtfully, lashing out with another finger bomb to destroy an incoming cannonball that would have smashed into the portside hull near the waterline. *There is something odd about these teens and their Devil Fruit powers. Kirishima allowed Izuku to hurl him across the water so easily, and now there's Izuku willing to see if he can jump several nautical miles away, over deep ocean mind you. Yes, indeed, there is something strange here. Still, Garp seems to not care about it, and I suppose I don't either. So long as they want to fight the good fight.*

"Do it. Then you and your friend can go ship to ship. Yama, help the boy find the target ship."

Still hesitating even as Yama moved to the prow, Izuku looked over at Shoto, watching the dual element user grimacing at the effort of the battle so far.

Despite that, though, Shoto nodded. "We've got defense, Zuk. Go."

Izuku still looked dubious, but Kyoka added her own words to Shoto's, lashing out with her Momo-made staff. "Get out there, Zuk. You know Kiri might need someone to watch his back. Besides, every ship you two take out, the better we're off here."

With that reassurance, Izuku called on One For All. Lightning arced around him, and he raced toward the prow, building up as much speed as he could then, with a grimace of effort, called for even more One For All, using more than forty percent in his legs as he jumped into the air in the direction Yama pointed. "Get fuckin' up above the gunsmoke, ya green barnacle. Then you'll see the ship with a flame-orange line along it's outer hull, fuckin' ugly thing. That's the ship yer spike-assed friend is on."

This let him cross at least half the distance before he found himself losing altitude. At that point, he kicked off the air itself, trying to emulate the mix of the Geppo and Soru techniques he had seen Garp and Whitman use. The effort had his legs creaking under the strain, and Izuku instantly knew he would pay for it later on, even if he didn't think anything had broken. Yet it worked, letting Izuku launch himself towards the ship from midair as if he had turned into a human cannonball.

Despite this, he didn't quite make it, but Izuku crossed at least four-fifth of the distance before he hit the water, where he bounced off the surface a few times like a skipping stone before sinking. *Crap! I hope that none of the officers saw that!*

In actuality, none of the officers did, bar Thomas. The sharpshooter was about to shout the traditional 'man overboard' call before he realized they weren't really in an place to do anything about it. the green-haired kid was way closer to the enemy ships than the Hound. A second later, even as he thought that, Thomas saw a hand and head appear above water as the supposed Devil Fruit user began to swim strongly towards the pirate ship his friend had already landed on. *So... wait, what? His power ain't a Devil Fruit then? What is it, if so?*

Thomas shook his head, his rifle, a North Blue special, firing at a pirate captain on a nearby vessel. The man went down without much of his face intact, and Thomas decided whatever was going on with the new Midshipman was none of his business. *As long as the cap'n knows and don't care, I don't care either. I got pirates ta kill.*

While he let his throbbing legs rest for a few minutes as dead weight, Izuku forged on, hoping that distance meant that none of the officers could see or otherwise detect he hadn't reached the ship.. *L, let's just ignore that for now, I can't do anything about it, after all. That, and the floating... debris. Ugh, so many bodies and so much debris and... no, no, don't think about it.* I should be happy that the Grand Line hasn't decided to butt in yet. (*)

In his head, one of the vestiges murmured, *"Yeah, definitely gonna have to get him up to speed on your ability first, Nana. He could probably learn how to use Float way faster than that Geppo and Soru nonsense."*

"Thank you! It's as if I haven't been saying that all the while!" Nana shot back, right before Izuku found himself grabbed from below.

Several of the fishman hadn't joined their captain in attacking the Hound earlier, staying back to defend their ship. Now, Izuku found himself facing off against two of them in their own environment. *This is not going to be fun!*

The two fishmen charged forward. One was armed with a huge axe, but despite how fast the fishmen could move in the water, there was a limit how fast they could use weapons like that. The other fishman, a puff-fish type, was far more dangerous. He left a trail of viscous green visible in the water coming from a few of this spines, and his hands were encased in metal gloves lined with spikes.

Izuku was able to back away from the axe, lashing out into it, shattering the weapon, before the other fishman was on him. The man's fist nearly caught Izuku, but he dodged that

and grimaced as a piece of the axe caught him in the side. *Thank you body armor!* He thought, before realizing he needed to get some air.

This seemed to be a signal for the two fishman to shift tactics. The puffer-fishman kept close lashing out with hard punches three of which caught and hammered into Izuku's shoulder, side and thigh as Izuku made for the surface. But the other fishman got above Izuku in the water, attacking him with the remaining long pole from his axe, which crashed into Izuku's shoulder and head, making him flinch and back away deeper into the water. The pair then worked together, keeping Izuku away from the top of the water until he was desperate for air.

Izuku was forced to use his battered legs to propel himself upward, pushing past the fishman's attempts to inhibit his movement. The makeshift staff shattered on his shoulder, but Izuku was way more durable than a normal human would be thanks to One For All. And far stronger, which the fishman who had been wielding the axe found out when he tried to grab Izuku's waist and swim down with him in his arms. A hard knee caused the fishman to gasp in pain and then Izuku's head was above the water, letting him gasp in air. At the same time, he lifted the fishman up out of the water breaking his grip around Izuku's waist, hurling him up into the air to slam into the side of the ship Kirishima was on.

He gasped, blood bursting out of his mouth as the side of the ship caved in, but then the other fishman grabbed at Izuku's feet and instantly began to backwater, pulling Izuku further down into the water. He was barely able to take half a gulp of air before he was pulled under, trying to kick out. But his leap had taken it out of his legs, and he could barely break the fishman's grip. Twisting, he launched himself downward with a Fifteen percent One for All push with one arm, his fist slamming into the puffer-fishman's chest.

The puffer-fishman tried to enlarge himself to block the blow, but it didn't work, and instead the water it had inhaled expelled violently, shooting the fishman even further down into the water until he was out of sight. The other fishman tried to get in Izuku's way again, but Izuku batted him aside with another One For All assisted blow, before climbing up the side of the ship, his fingers digging into the wood, and his legs, throbbing and sore, practically dangling behind him uselessly.

When he reached the top of the hull, an anxious Kirishima helped Izuku pull himself up over the gunwale. "You okay, bro? I'd have joined you in the water, but..." Kirishima shrugged uncomfortably. "While my manly Quirk is able to take a lot of damage, if I use it in the water, I kind of sink too fast for it to be very useful."

"I'm okay, although that was really not pleasant at all. I just hope that was the last of the fishman." Izuku gasped in here for a few moments, simply lying on the deck even as the battle continued all around them. After a few minutes, Izuku pushed himself resolutely to his feet,

trying to ignore how badly his legs were throbbing at the moment. "Come on, there are still other pirate ships out there we can help deal with."

With Banjo's help once more, Kirishima found himself flung through the air again like a bola, slamming into a second pirate vessel, although this time, the aim hadn't been so accurate. Instead of hitting the ship's masts as he had before, he landed in among the crowd of pirates on the deck. That ship had been trying to attack the marine vessel prow to prow, with dozens of pirates actually polling the ship along as it had been demasted. Even so, the crew had been eager to get to grips with the marines.

Now those pirates found themselves bowled over, squashed, impaled or smashed over the sides by Kirishima's impact. Izuku took a brief moment to watch how his friend was doing before grimacing and lowering himself back over the side. There was no way his legs were up to allowing himself another jump, not even at a lower percentage of One For All than before. Regardless, despite the fight against the mermen, his arms were still going strong, and he reached the enemy ship, whereupon he basically climbed up and smashed his way through the gun into the lowest gun deck the moment he was above the water line.

Attacked from above and below, the pirates on that ship ceased being able to defend themselves well. Despite how gung-ho they had been before, against a Devil Fruit user and Izuku's super-strength, the fight went out of the pirates quickly.

They began to surrender, and Izuku formally took those surrenders, tying them up, tossing every weapon they could see over the side or making the pirates do it, then taking the ship's normal log pose and the eternal pose that was part of the Dead End Race. Without those, even if the pirates tried and succeeded in getting away, they would be lost on the Grand Line.

Meanwhile, the ship's carpenter, Whitman and the master-at-arms had also taken to the sky, bouncing along in short bursts towards two other ships that had tried to close with the marine man-of-war.

The marine ship had taken several shots despite Roland's earlier words to his Izuku, and the wounded had begun to pile up. Below, Tenya seconded to the surgeon's crews, Momo and Tsuyu remained busy, racing from one place to another, helping to ferry wounded into the med bay, where, with ten of the sail monkeys now repurposed, the ship's surgeon was hard at work.

The battle continued for a while, but every advantage except for numbers had shifted to the marine side. The pirates didn't have any new World vets among them, and if there were Devil Fruit users, none had shown up yet. Worse, the pirates continued to get in one another's way, those few vessels that could move not bothering to move enough to avoid shooting their fellows. Without using their numbers better and with most of their vessels demasted, it was

only a matter of time before they began to surrender, unable to overcome the marine's defenses.

Eventually, the last of the still-fighting pirate vessels began to sink under the waves, its crew deciding to die rather than surrender. Dozens of pirates had been captured aboard the vessels that Izuku and Kirishima had invaded, let alone the ones that the other officers had assaulted, and now found themselves lined up and tied together aboard some of their own away ships.

However, Garp had yet to return from hunting down those ships that it attempted to entirely avoid the battle, and by the time Izuku and Kirishima returned to the marine ship, Roland and the sail master were also missing, having taken the fight to the enemy as the guns started to fall silent more and more.

"There was a pirate over there who had a Devil Fruit," one of the seamen on the deck said, pointing vaguely in the aft direction. "Their ship was almost out of sight before we noticed, and Lieutenant Roland raced off after them along with the ship's carpenter. Sail Master Whitman went after another once we were down to four enemy ships."

Izuku had to think for a moment to realize that this didn't leave many commissioned officers still aboard the ship. Indeed, he could only think of two. The surgeon, who was almost undoubtedly too busy right now to care about anything else, and maybe the sniper, Thomas. But looking up, that man was avoiding looking down entirely. It was very obvious that the other young man had no interest in giving anyone orders.

Izuku wondered for a moment if this was some kind of test for one of them. *Given all the little tests they've given us in the form of hazing, I suppose it could be. But since there are only warrant officers left and none of the more senior midshipmen have stepped up... drat.*

With that thought, Izuku breathed in and, with the same determination with which he had led his friends on Elena, began to bellow orders, shouting, "All right! I want a report from the medical bay. If the surgeon needs more hands down there, he'll get them. Have the most senior gun captains start to bring in half the guns, resting their crews, but I want at least half our broadsides to be ready to fire just in case. Bosun, I want at least six away teams with Kirishima to go over to the ships Kirishima and I took over. There will be prisoners there, and since we are also supposed to be investigating who started this race, we need some to question."

The boatswain nodded, although internally he doubted the pirates would be able to help them with those inquiries. Still, capturing the pirates wouldn't be all that hard after a fight like this. Soon, the ship's two away boats were lowered, with twelve men apiece, racing towards the enemy vessels while the other began to move around the area, picking up those pirates who were in the water as they went.

From there, with Kirishima providing a few suggestions in terms of how to command the ship, Izuku began to shout orders, while nearby, the boatswain watched. The boy had good instincts, and his priorities straight in terms of taking care of the wounded and check for any serious damage to the ship.

Yeah, I think these kids will do well. He reflected, already writing up a mental report for Garp when he returned.

The Vice Admiral had not returned by the time the prisoners from the ships Kirishima and Izuku had attacked were aboard the marine vessel and being hurried down into the cells below, nor by the time the last of the away teams searching for survivors among the sunken vessels returned. By that point, a storm had begun to come up from out of nowhere, as was usual on the Grand Line. That was no place to be on a small away ship, as Kirishima and the others could well attest.

With Izuku, Tenya and the others pitching in, the two away boats were quickly pulled back up onto deck, battened down, and the ship made ready for the storm, almost wallowing as it heaved and rattled on its two anchors. Soon, though, as that storm began to pass, and none of the other officers had returned, Izuku made the decision to get the ship moving again. There was nothing left of the battle bar floating debris now, and thus nothing to remain here for.

“Sail monkeys onto the ropes! Thomas, do you still have sight of land?” He asked, his voice trembling a little at the amount of authority that it suddenly fallen on his shoulders.

Thomas had reported that he could see land a moment before Jirou had shouted a warning about the air temperature changing. Now, he snapped back crisp and clear. “Aye, ahead and to port, just over the horizon.”

Izuku nodded, then looked over at Kirishima. “Kirishima, what kind of sail---”

“Leave it to me, Izuku.” Kirishima grinned and whispered into his ear. With Kirishima doing so, Izuku shouted orders, and the sail monkeys, save those on duty below deck for a moment, raced up the rigging. Moments later, as they got under way Jirou bellowed a warning, and the ship was forced to stop and fight a sea monster. It reared up out of the water, its massive maw already bloody from gorging itself on the pirates that had died and sunk during the battle, but when that mouth opened as if to take a bite out of the ship, Shoto’s fire slammed into its face, searing away scales and eyes.

Thankfully, by the time that monster began to subside back into the water, Roland had returned along with the chief carpenter, who was in fact the one who was doing the travelling for the pair. When he touched down on the main deck, looking as if his legs were in as much pain as Izuku’s, Izuku gratefully handed over the deck to Roland.

An hour later, the ship hit the outer edge of the island's weather system, and everything began to calm down, at which point most of the Marines shifted their attention back to repairs and tallies of what the battle had cost. The ship had basically gone through more than two-thirds of its onboard magazine capacity, both in terms of cannonballs and gunpowder. Despite that, the Master at Arms, who had also returned by that point, reported there was still more than enough gunpowder, muskets and ammunition for a strong force once they reached the island if it was necessary.

There were literally dozens of wounded from the battle, however. Shrapnel was deadly, particularly in ship-to-ship combat, and could cause horrendous wounds. Of the dozens injured, only seven would be fit for duty ever again despite the surgeon's best efforts.

Yet Roland knew that was remarkably light in comparison to what they could have faced if they had even had just Garp or the other officers on defense. Shoto had truly made his mark there, along with Izuku, even better than Garp had been able to give and how he had needed to split his attention so quickly to deal with the giants. So while there had been dozens of wounded and the majority of them would need to be forced to take up land jobs from now on, there were actually only nine dead.

Relieved of duty in the emergency medical teams, Momo came away from the entire experience almost exhausted both mentally and physically, having pushed her powers as best she could, hoping that the toll of battle would mean that no one realized that she had only returned once to refill her bag with medical supplies. That, and she also came away from the experience with a lot more respect for the ship's surgeon. Quillo had proven to be just as good as any of the surgeons back on Clockwork Island, and an even faster worker than all of them combined.

The only critically wounded person who had died after reaching his medical bay had been misdiagnosed by one of the other groups of workers. They had reported the man as having a shattered arm and a splinter in his side, but it had actually been the perforated back that had done him in, causing him to bleed out before Quillo realized what was going on, busy as he was with other patients.

She joined the other midshipman on the main deck, where she and the other 'Devil Fruit' users were given some food, as it was assumed they would probably be going ashore if any large-scale opposition was spotted. This food came in the form of mostly cold sandwiches and hot coffee, the taste of which made Momo grimace. She was Japanese through and through, and despite liking a cappuccino occasionally while abroad with her parents, had never liked coffee. Certainly not black, strong coffee like this was. *UGH.*

She wasn't certain what was worse. The fact that there wasn't even any sugar on offer, or the fact that everyone but Tenya and Shoto were guzzling down the coffee like ambrosia. *At least Izuku looks as if he's not enjoying the experience, but Kyo-chan, no! Don't go to the coffee-side!*

By the time the teens had finished their meals, they could make the island ahead of them from the main deck. Well, those who were standing anyway. Those sitting down could not look over the restored figurehead shaped in the image of a happy dog.

The island in question was a mountainous one, with two small mountains to either side of a larger central mountain through which a huge river seemed to run up and over from the other side. It was also an incredibly populous island, as only one of those smaller mountains didn't show signs of extensive housing. Most of those houses were small and built to the same kind of blocky, European style that had been seen on Clockwork Island, with none of the mix of styles that had been visible on the island where the locals had turned against them, at least from this far away. The whole thing looked like a maze of small to medium-sized houses.

Regardless, what could also be seen was absolutely no sign of a Marine or World Government flag anywhere. This was one of many, many islands that didn't come under the command of the World Government, ruled either by whatever pirate or criminal organization was in power this month, or a local Lord of some kind. One who, in this case, had very obviously thrown in his lot with pirates or been ousted by the criminal element.

The island also had defenses in the form of several cannon towers, much like Elena had. Although unlike Elena's one tower, these were far more rickety constructions, and there were seven of them facing towards the Marine ship. They hadn't yet fired, though, which had Izuku wondering aloud what was going on. "N, not that I am complaining, far from it really."

Snickering, Roland simply pointed up into the sky, and Izuku turned his attention upwards to see the Garp descending out of the sunset, a grin on his face.

He landed on the prow of the ship, nodding at them all. "I've already wiped out most of their defenses," he reported, and Izuku realized that those gun towers didn't look rickety because they had been built that way, but because that was what was left after Garp had done whatever he had done. "I also sank at least fourteen warships out there. What was our final tally?"

"Sir!" The shout came from on high. "Twenty-eight pirate vessels sunk of all sizes, sir. I noted at least seven captains with bounties on them, including those two pirate giants you took out."

“Excellent!” Garp said with a grin. Marines could not be awarded bounties, but any family members of marines who died against such pirates would be given a portion of the bounties in question, and it also served to better show how much real progress had been made when it came to sweeping this portion of the Grand Line free of pirate scum.

He then sobered a little, gesturing Roland closer, and Izuku could make out the words ‘casualties’ as Roland replied.

After listening, Garp sobered a little more, shaking his head. “Well, at least their families will be well looked after.” He looked around at the crew, then asked Roland to pick out a group of soldiers to go with them to the island. “You know I’m no good for investigative stuff, but you are.”

“Izuku front and center,” Roland bellowed. “Momo, Tenya, Kyoka, you too!”

Izuku waited at attention as the ship continued on its way towards the should the pork, while Momo slid in between him and Jirou. “Momo, you and Izuku have given me the impression of being the most observant of your group. We’re going to go ashore. Jirou, your jakes, Tenya, your speed. We need to find out who organized the Dead End Race, and the locals aren’t going to be very helpful for now. We’re going to need to look for physical clues as to where it was all organized, as well as listen for anyone muttering about who was in charge here, or anything specific we can use.”

Garp nodded at that, watching the four teens’ faces and the rest of the men as Roland gave examples of what to look for. His Kenbunshoku wasn’t the best among the marines, and it couldn’t reach all sides of the island. They had to find whoever was behind this before he could get away, if they hadn’t already. If whoever was behind this was smart, Roland knew they already would have, but since the main battle had taken place outside of the island’s weather system, let alone outside of range of anyone trying to watch for it, he hoped that wasn’t the case.

“This island isn’t exactly part of the World Government, and a lot of the locals will be antagonistic towards us Marines,” Roland warned as the ship pulled alongside a wharf. “Not all of them, but enough to make trouble while we remain here to instill some order. It’s doubtful that any of them will try to make big trouble with Garp around, but be aware of thrown cobblestones or bottles. And don’t expect any of them to be helpful until we start spending some money.”

That last was a very blunt statement, causing several of the youngsters to be taken aback, and Roland shrugged. “Do you think islands like this side with pirates because they always agree with their lifestyle? No, it’s because, as powerful as the Marines are, we can’t be everywhere in enough strength to protect them. They make good with pirates because it’s

simply the wisest course for such islands, and because commerce keeps everything going. The phrase money talks is always a useful one for a reason.”

Momo winced at that, while the others all nodded.

Soon after that, the group of Marines went ashore. The locals looked at them wearily, some with surly gazes, but mostly just watching, waiting. That look kind of bothered Izuku, but he pushed it to one side as the navigator led them towards the nearest bar. There, Roland questioned several of the locals, while Mei looked around, taking in everything, as Jirou listened to all the background muttered conversations, most of which had died out the moment they entered.

Meanwhile, Tenya had been sent racing ahead through the town, shouting out that any information given would be up for a reward from the Marines. He did so determinedly, not happy with how he had done today. While zooming back and forth with wounded and orderlies inside the ship had been an okay use of his power, it still left him feeling as if he could have done more, especially with the example of Izuku and Shoto. Indeed, even Melissa and Mei had done more than he had during the battle.

This time, however, it was his efforts that bore fruit, and he rapidly returned to Roland with news of one particular bar. They had yet to run into any real problems with the local civilians, bar a few tossed bottles and one hurled cobblestone, but Jirou had heard them all coming, and Izuku caught each thrown item before it could hit any of the Marines. Then, in a flash of inspiration, Izuku had even begun to make a game out of it.

By the time Tenya was back, juggling the bottles several of them had thrown, with Momo laughingly asking if it was more difficult to juggle several objects or a smaller number of different objects at once, as Roland and the rest of the marines looked on.

“Lieutenant, sir! Beg to report that three people in a row said that a particular bar near the river leading through the island was the center of the Dead End Race. They weren’t able to give me any details, but they saw a lot of pirates come and go!” Tenya saluted, the move carrying with it a certain amount of fervor that Roland had to chuckle at internally.

Allowed, he ordered Tenya to show them the bar in question. “In fact, can you carry me, Tenya?”

Blinking, Tenya slowly nodded, and Roland climbed on his back. “Thank god. My knees are fucking killing me.”

Within moments, with Roland bouncing on his back and the others following more slowly, Tenya arrived at the bar. The bartender was nowhere in sight, and most of the clientele

had also vacated the premises, although there were a few surly looking drunks. Roland began questioning them, and was still doing so when the others arrived.

"I don't get it," Izuku muttered, looking around. "This bar is a lot smaller than most of the other bars we've gone to. Why would it be a place where something like the Dead End Race could be organized? I mean, it doesn't even look as if it would have enough room for all the captains of the vessels, let alone anything else." He went on in a lower tone, knowing that anyone who would come forward with information might also be targeted by others who didn't want them to. He had read of a lot of that kind of thing happening in the battle days. "What did those three civilians say exactly, Tenya?"

"They said a lot of pirate crews came by and then left. Organization. And that someone here was doing the organizing. I even got a name, but beyond that, no details," Tenya said somewhat stiffly. Then again, Tenya did most things stiffly, but Izuku was a little confused as to the particular reason behind his stiffness with Izuku at the moment. However, he gestured Tenya to hop over with him along the bar, looking for anything that could be incriminating. Any lists, names, or secret passages.

When Izuku mentioned that last idea, Tenya looked a little affronted at the very idea of secret passages. "Look at the exterior of this building! Any secret passage would be a major safety hazard!"

"Unless it was going downwards," Jirou said from where she was also investigating the size of the wall. Momo was moving the various tables and other things, looking for a more utilitarian trap door. Eventually, Jirou stabbed into one segment of the wall and blinked. "There's a hallway beyond this! I'm getting an echo."

Roland was instantly beside her, fist raised. A single punch removed the wall, and then there was a pirate flashing towards them out of the darkness from beyond, moving faster than any pirate Izuku or the others had seen yet, even Gasparde. But Roland's dagger was raised, blocking the blow, and Jirou, after getting over a moment's shock, lashed out with her earjacks, stabbing into the man's leg.

That leg nearly collapsed, and the man stumbled back, making no sound. His face was covered with a strange death's head jester-like mask, and with his all-black clothing, Jirou got the impression of someone who had gone for the scary clown look, and accomplished it well.

Right before Roland's free hand lashed out. "Shigan!"

His middle finger stabbed, poking into and through the attacker's neck right below the mask. The man fell, gurgling, both hands raised to the deadly wound on his throat.

“Muskets at the ready, follow me. Midshipman Jirou, stop every hundred feet to look for any other secret passages. Tenya, upfront with me.” Roland grimaced, looking down at his legs, then pulled out some kind of reddish pill. He bit into it, and suddenly his whole body glowed red for a second, as if it was giving off tremendous heat. Then it disappeared, and he stood more easily on his battered legs. “I am so going to pay for that later. Don’t do drugs, kids. You and I are going to do a speed run, the rest follow up behind. Momo, stay with Jirou. Izuku, bring up the rear. Seaman Davesto, take three others and run back to the harbor with the news.”

Izuku might’ve protested, but Roland and Tenya were already moving, with Roland taking to the air of the tunnel and zooming along above Tenya via Soru and Geppo combined, while Tenya raced along as fast as he could go. It had taken them too long to find this place, and now Roland knew time was of the essence to discover whoever we had been behind the dead-end race. *Although with that Doping pill I’m gonna be on my back tomorrow. And Quillo might well try to gut me like a fish.*

The other marines followed up quickly, with Jirou lagging behind, obeying orders and examining both sides and the roof of the tunnel for any other hidden side core doors. As she did, Momo and Izuku moved with her. “What do you think that pill was?” he asked idly.

“Roland is a rather easy-going fellow, but I think that whole thing about drugs was not a joke, but rather the simple truth. A fast-acting drug of some kind to let him ignore the weakness in his knees,” Momo mused, before looking sideways at Izuku. “And if you even ask him about it, Izuku, I will slap you so hard your freckles fall off.”

“I’ll help,” Jirou quipped. “And I bet Melissa and Tenya would join in. You’d abuse the hell out of something like that, Zuk, don’t bother denying it.”

“I, I never... well, I mean, if it could help me get stronger then...” Izuku mumbled, flushing under the twin glares he was getting now.

“Then the drawbacks will almost certainly be very bad, something Melissa would no doubt be shouting your ear off about right now” Momo interjected repressively. “I say again. Slap. Your. Freckles. Off.” *Which would be somewhat of a pity. But if it keeps the rest of you intact, I will do without the added cuteness factor. Gah, wait... where did that come from?*

Thankfully, before Momo could blush at her inner thoughts, Kyoka reached over, grabbed her arm and dragged the taller girl to a stop. “I found something else.”

That caused Izuku and Momo to look to where she had just jabbed an earjack into the ceiling. “Really? A hidden hallway above a hidden hallway? How droll,” Momo muttered, while Izuku jumped up and smashed the area where Kyoka had just stabbed. The two girls and the

young man waited until the bits of false stone fell away, then Jirou reached up and pulled down a collapsible ladder.

“So, we go up, right?” Kyoka asked.

Both the other would-be heroes nodded. After climbing up the ladder, the three friends moved along this corridor slowly. It continued downwards almost as if it was paralleling the other hallway for a few seconds. Then it began to spiral up into a spiral staircase.

“All of this must’ve been cut out of the mountain,” Izuku murmured. “I wonder how deep we’re going to go?”

“I could barely make out Tenya’s telltale zooming noise before they were out of sight along the hallway, so deep,” Jirou said, before pausing, listening intently. “We might be coming up on the next floor of this passage.”

Izuku gently eased Jirou and Momo behind him, with Momo allowing it only after making sure that Izuku was wearing the Kevlar body armor she had made for them all underneath his Marine uniform. She hadn’t seen him in action during the fight, so she hadn’t known if he was doing so.

Moments later, as Jirou reported hearing faint sounds of noise in the distance, they came up to the top of the spiral staircase and another shorter corridor leading to a door in the distance. Jirou estimated that it was probably another fake door on the other side, and this was someone’s bolthole.

This proved to be the case, and the rat in question was about to use it as they arrived. The door opened, and two more masked men like the scary clown from before flowed into the tunnel, armed not with short dirks as the other man had been, but blunderbusses, each of them with not one wide tube, but three.

As one, they fired at the kids, who ducked and yelped, with Momo gasping as one pellet nearly grazed her head. Another almost hit Jirou in the side of the face before they ducked behind Izuku, who had raised his arms protectively to his own face. Luckily, his Kevlar body armor was up to the task of protecting him from the attack, although one pellet did nick his ear, leaving him bleeding.

All three of them stumbled upon the impact of so many small musket balls, but the Kevlar body armor saw them through with only bruising. Only Momo had to gasp in pain as a few of those hits to her chest rattled her despite her protective body cast.

Then she was ducking around Izuku, hurling a grenade forward. This wasn't a special grenade or anything similar. She hadn't had time, nor frankly, after the battle, did Momo have any reserve for building anything, even something so small. This was simply a regular grenade.

To her dismay, the two masked individuals ducked back out from the doorway ahead of them, allowing it to explode harmlessly, before one of them charged forward, armed with a dirk.

Izuku met the charge, smacking the dirk to one side, his fist coming up in a blow that took the other man straight in the chest with enough force to send him zooming backwards as if shot out of a cannon. However, the other masked man had gone to ground and now fired at Izuku's legs.

Jaros shouted warning had all three of them jumping up and over the incoming shots, from the multi-barreled rifle this time, rather than the blunderbuss, which had been more of a shotgun blast than anything else. *He must have grabbed it from around the door!* Izuku thought.

Before anything else could happen, there was a sound from behind the man, who twisted around just in time for Tenya's knee to take him in the back of the head, crushing him down into the ground. He looked at the three, blinking. "I take it that you three found some kind of final escape route?"

"Part of one anyway," Jirou said, gasping. Those few moments of combat had been incredibly deadly in the hallway, with no room to move and the enemy having such firepower, and his legs were already killing him before he even came ashore. "Thanks for the save." He said, while Jirou and Momo added their own profuse words of thanks, and Tenya smiled, moving away from the doorway and gesturing them forward.

The group came out into a large office of some kind that had a balcony on the far end. Roland was there, holding a massively rotund, tanned and Hawaiian-shirted man, who had apparently been trying to make a run for it. He nodded towards them all, gesturing to the man with a twitch of his head. "There must've been some kind of alarm on the door as we came in. This little rat and several hundred others were holed up in here, hoping they wouldn't be discovered, at least, that's what I think so far. We'll see what we can get out of him when we start questioning him later."

For just a moment, as the others all nodded, Izuku's eyes were drawn to a piece of paper on a desk nearby, on which some kind of symbol of a smiling face. It looked almost like someone had merged a smiling face and the pirate's mark with something, but Roland grabbed up the piece of paper and shoved it into his pocket before Izuku could take a better look at it. "There's still some pockets of fighting down below. Get in there. I'm going to take this man straight back to Garp, is the hallway there clear?"

"It is, sir. We didn't see any other off passages or anything," Jirou reported.

"Good. I have about ten more minutes before the Doping Pill wears off, and I crash. I'll send either Garp or someone else up here to take command, but until then, Izuku, you're in charge."

With that, Roland nodded brusquely, and, still carrying the far larger, fatter man in the air, shifted around the group and headed into the tunnel that Jirou had discovered. The three other teens looked at Tenya for a second, then moved over to the balcony, staring out into a vast cavern complex, where other pirates and Marines could be seen fighting all over the place.

"Roland and I barreled through, throwing most of the pirates into disarray. This let the Marines follow up, but he wanted to get to the highest level the moment we hit that area. Apparently, it is almost routine in such places for the owner or the local crime boss to be situated high up, the better to survey his den of inequity," Tenya stated.

"Now we just need to clean up going down, I suppose," Izuku said with mock cheer, before jumping over the side of the balcony, heading downward and across as best he could. With his battered legs, that wasn't all that much, and even pushing up over the balcony had **hurt** despite not having used One For All. However, he landed and rolled on the other side well enough, lashing out at some of the pirates who had taken cover behind overturned tables and so forth.

"Have at thee!" With a shout, Tenya followed him, using his engines to propel himself through the air for a moment to land with even more force than Izuku had, scattering the pirates.

Behind them, Momo and Jirou exchanged a glance, then, as one, turned to the nearby stairs leading downward. "Slow and steady might not win this race, but it is a good deal safer," Momo murmured, even as she surreptitiously created a musket filled with powder for herself, grimacing as her stomach reminded her that while she might not Create on a one-to-one ratio with her fat cells, such certainly started the process.

"True that," Jirou murmured, briefly leaning into Momo's side for a second, which Momo returned, before they were down on the next level, attacking another group of pirates there who had been trying to shoot across the way at Izuku and Tenya. They did not succeed, and most of those pirates went down before they could realize that still more trouble was coming up behind them.

Thanks to Roland and Tenya blitzing through the prepared defenses, most of the pirates were still in disarray and had begun to fall to the marines of the shore party and the teens. Soon, still more Marines arrived to pile in, with Garp in the lead of the relieving force. A lot of

pirates began to surrender the moment Garp came out of the tunnel, bellowing laughter all the while, and within fifteen minutes of the local gang boss having been taken away by Roland, the fighting was over.

As the prisoners began to be rounded up, Garp smiled over at the teens, slapping Tenya on the back. “Kept up with Roland on the run when he was Doped up, did you? Well done! You’ll stay with me here, help us round up any of these others. There’s a few more tunnels down there I can see on the bottom of this cavern, and with Yama and Whitman guarding that prisoner like a hen with only one egg, exploring them will be up to you, me, Garland, and the rankers.”

“Yes, sir! I’m up for it, sir!” Tenya said stoutly, his shoulders straightening even more than normal.

Garp turned to Izuku and the other two girls. “As for you three, we’ve got some wounded here. Escort them back to the ship and then get some rest. Your battles’re over for the day.”

Considering it wasn’t day but full-on night by the time the trio exited the bar with the wounded around them, none of the three was going to argue. Indeed, by the time they got back to the ship, Izuku was almost dead on his feet. So much so, he could not even remember climbing into his hammock, his last memory reaching up for it before exhaustion took him.

OOOOOOO

Izuku wasn’t alone in crashing after the battle ended despite the amount of caffeine they had imbibed. A significant portion of the crew did the same, with only the old saws and the group that had gone ashore remaining awake. Battles at sea were long, incredibly intense things for nearly everyone aboard a fighting vessel, especially considering a full watch would normally be asleep at any time of the day or night and would instead find themselves at battle stations. That was just necessary on the Grand Line, and it bit the crew on the ass in moments like this. If not for caffeine, it would have been far worse, but now, the toll was due.

None of the crew was hit as bad by that toll as Roland. If Izuku had any idea whatsoever about investigating the Doping Pill that Roland had taken, Quillo’s bellows of fury, which woke the entire crew the next morning, killed that idea.

Melissa joining Momo and Jirou after being told about it at lunch later that day and joining them in staring at him knowingly had nothing to do with it. Really. He wasn’t intimidated by that, or when Tsuyu and Mei also joined to show the full force of female solidarity at all. Nor about how Melissa had gently, even caringly, pulled him aside, asked how his legs were feeling, and then proceeded to explain why drugs were wrong, and precisely how

she would go about remonstrating with him or anyone else she knew who took unknown medicine.

No, Izuku's decision to not pursue the Doping Pill was purely based on the surgeon's roaring threats that morning of "All your vitamins rectally for a week! And no, you're not getting any painkillers, not now, not for the next three months!" Really. Those weren't the icing on the cake at all.

Roland was apparently entirely unable to move and in so much pain, he had handed over all his duties to a few of the more senior officers, along with the pursar. So there was that as well, although given his heroic tendencies, Melissa and the other girls knew that would not have been enough to stop Izuku from abusing the Doping pill if he could.

While Roland was laid up, Garp, Whitman and the rest of the officers had the crew back at work again quickly. Some of the teens joined the marines under Garp and Tenya to comb through the city and what little of the island lay beyond it for further pirates or criminal types. Tenya joined Garp for the entire day, bouncing around over the city, doing more to show the flag than actually find criminals. Momo, Tsuyu, Shoto and Kirishima joined the pursar and thirty marines in moving around the docks and beyond in patrols, rounding up anyone trying to make trouble of any kind, mostly looters and so forth.

More clandestinely, Garland and his corporals slowly began moving through the town, capturing more serious criminals as they went. The Master-At-Arms called on Jirou, but even without her to help with his inquiries, he seemed to have a nose for finding locals willing to help with such things, coming back to the ship with criminals ranging from a group of swindlers to a local murderer who had apparently been using the cover of the pirates roaming the town to hide his activities.

Luckily, there, none of the 'Devil Fruit' using teens had to be involved in this darker aspect of restoring law and order. Their abilities and attitudes didn't match the needs of that side of law-keeping. The only one who did learn of some aspects of it was Momo, who only got involved tangentially when she was seconded to the bursar, who began to go over the crime lord's books and branched out from there in the days following their arrival at the island.

Mei, Shoto, Izuku and Melissa weren't involved in any of this. Shoto was assigned ship protection detail with Yama, whose genuine inability to not curse while speaking meant he was routinely kept away from the locals. "Yer just a bit too intense, Yama!" Garp had laughed that morning, slapping the almost equally built man on the shoulder.

"Bah, blistering weaklin' landlubbers can't face the wind, let alone the fuckin' words of a seaman! Scare 'em into shitin' their pants and pissin' blood, I would," Yama had huffed in return, but Izuku and the others got the distinct impression this was an old joke between the two.

Mei officially joined the carpenter's crew, joining the repair teams under Foril's watchful gaze. This was more a condemnation than she realized, unfortunately. Her inability to work with the others while firing the guns had caused more than a few bumps, bruises and one broken hand during the battle, and none of the gun captains were willing to work with her until she learned to get along, unlike Melissa. Foril, on the other hand, was willing to sit on her, seeing her eagerness and skills as more important. So long as she didn't try to add things instead of just repairing them.

Amusingly enough, Melissa and Izuku were the only ones among the teens who knew how to sew, and thus, Whitman had them join the sailors who were sewing up the damaged sails. There were a lot of them, thanks to Garp's pell-mell race to get to the area where the Dead End Race was happening.

After four days, most of the physical investigations were finished, and the first hangings had begun to be handed out. By this point the locals had, for the most part, come around to the marine presence. Not just because of how much real scum Garland was finding, but because of Garp. His simple presence and the public perception of him was enough to bring most of the locals to their side in a single day and that continued throughout the next few days as he moved around the town, laughing, bellowing with good humor as he tossed little boys up into the air to catch them, ate or drank pubs under and generally caroused, larger than life and twice as jovial.

Garp had even had a narcoleptic episode as he had at the start of the battle, and hadn't punished or even been annoyed by any of the boys and girls who had drawn on him or put flowers on him. Instead, he had simply laughed loudly and given prizes out for the drawing he'd liked best.

There would be no talk here of Absolute Justice or punishing the innocent civilians of the island for going along with the pirates and the crime boss. Not while Garp was around. With the crime boss in custody along with his books, records and access to his underground base, their power was broken and would remain so.

On the fifth day in port, Momo woke up with the dawn, as was her wont. She enjoyed mornings, and, sighing, she pushed herself to her feet. The girls were still asleep all around her, and Momo made a point of being quiet as she got dressed for the day and out the door.

The day before, the bursar had purchased the lease on a large warehouse on the docks as well as rooms in several inns around the dockyard area. Foril wanted to use the island's dry dock to do some maintenance on top of the damage done during the battle, most of which had already been repaired. That let the crew spread out and have some 'garrison time' as the seamen called it. In this case, for most of the crew, it meant basically space to spread out more, and better, to have actual bunks or at least mattresses rather than hammocks for all of them.

Something that Shoto was inordinately happy about, according to Izuku and Tenya. It was quite nice of Foril to go the extra step and let him have the room that Foril was given, along with the other officers, opting to remain aboard ship instead. Shoto really has not taken to hammocks or sharing a room with someone very well, although I still have to wonder why. Hopefully, a good night's sleep will start to see him right.

Exiting the separate inn where the girls had been given rooms, she found Izuku exiting the warehouse where he, the other teens and the sailors had been set up. He looked at her in surprise, while Momo waved at him. In return, Izuku smiled that shy, self-effacing smile he always put on when he interacted with one of the girls one-on-one and they showed him any kind of positivity. Momo thought it cute, even if she no longer approved of it, given why he smiled like that. "He, hello, Yaomomo. Um, I thought you'd be sleeping in, since we were given the day off."

"I thought you would be too," Momo rejoined, sticking her head in the air mock-snootily, not commenting on how his stutter had returned for a moment. *It is a work in progress, dear.* "If you must know, I love quiet mornings and watching cities like this wake up, it is about as fun as people watching for me. Although unlike you, I have not had nearly as hard a time getting sleep aboard ship."

Izuku flushed a little. "I, er, got used to waking up with the dawn back when All Might started to train me." While he had yet to share the secret of One For All, he had shared with Momo and the others that All Might had noticed that his body simply wasn't strong enough to handle his Quirk, hence why everyone had thought he was Quirkless. "Besides, while Garp might have given the whole crew the day off, I bet that the other officers will tell us we've 'volunteered' to help them with various projects. So having some time this morning on my own sounds nice."

"So long as you are not breaking yourself through exercise," Momo chortled. "Else I might need to speak to Meli-chan again."

"Um, no, don't worry about that, my legs are still so sore that just walking is hard, let alone anything else. Despite that, I thought maybe I'd explore the island a bit. I um, haven't had any time to do so, really, and Tenya-san said it's actually quite a fun place, with lots of little nooks and small streets." Izuku pointed down the street. "Erm, Tenya even said he found a café relatively near here where they make fresh bread and tea every morning. Um..." Izuku hesitated, his old social anxieties rearing their heads once more. "Um, would you like to join me?"

"Oooh, that sounds delightful," Momo said, smiling happily and practically skipping over to Izuku, not noticing how he blushed and looked away. Momo in bouncy mode was definitely a

sight to see, even in a marine uniform, but it also tested his self-control a lot. “Actually, let me go see Mr. Crowley. He said something about wanting to make deals with the locals to get us all some proper food while we’re here.”

“S, sure. I’ll wait here.” Izuku replied.

Moments later, Momo returned from the inn where the officers had taken rooms, a bag of beli on her waist. The pair walked along the dock until they reached the small café Tenya had pointed Izuku to. It was near the end of the dock where it abutted into the side of one of the smaller mountains that was also part of the city that dominated the majority of the island. There, several small walking paths wound up the worked side of the mountain into a series of terraces where rows of houses and other buildings were.

At first, the proprietor and his sole waitress didn’t seem all that happy to see them, but that faded quickly as Momo and Izuku began to order things, not just for themselves, which would’ve been a massive order and of itself given who was doing it, but Momo, ever thoughtful, had the idea to open a line of credit at the café. This would have the baker prepare a significant portion of their bread for the marines every day as long as they were in port.

By the time Momo paid a down payment for the work in the form of a gold bar, they had taken from the Trump pirates, the man was ecstatic and even offered to send some of his servers along with the two to help shift the food.

Twenty minutes later, Momo and Izuku were sitting in the small open-air portion of the café on its roof. At first, while they had waited for their food, Momo had insisted on pouring them tea as they talked about their time aboard the Hound so far. Now, they both smiled happily as the food arrived. Fresh food in terms of sausage and juice, which was a rarity aboard ship, along with bagels that were also freshly made.

Taking a bite, Momo let loose a moan that was almost erotic and certainly enough to cause Izuku to blush. “Mmm~ , fresh bagels. I would give near anything to have some fresh rice, a traditional Japanese breakfast, but this is the next best thing!”

Still blushing, Izuku mumbled agreement, looking away and over the side of the top of the roof. Both of them ate slowly, savoring each bite as they took in the morning, while people in the town slowly roused.

The two of them sat, watching the other early risers come and go for a time, the day seemingly so calm and serene after the events of the days before. Even better, unlike the day after the battle against the pirate fleet, although calling it a fleet was admittedly a bit of a misnomer, a lot of the people below looked to have smiles on their faces. Especially the shop

owners. That included the shop owner of the café, and as Momo raised a hand to get one of the waiters to come over for a refill of their teapot, Izuku took the opportunity to ask a question.

“Excuse me, but, um, don’t take this the wrong way, but it looks as if e, everyone is a lot happier now than they were when we first kicked out the pirates. That seems to be a remarkably quick turnaround, I mean, it hasn’t even been a week, and you all must know that Admiral Garp’s not going to be staying here. Is, is that normal?”

The elderly matron, who apparently was married to the baker who ran the café and was the only waitress, laughed, shaking her head as she looked down at Izuku and Momo, who’d also adopted an intrigued expression. “That is true. Senior Lieutenant Roland said we would have to be leery of locals who might only be acting as if they are happy, and others who might take offense. And we certainly saw that while we were trying to find that local gangster fellow and the next day. But we have not seen much evidence of it since beyond rowdy teenagers, drunks and outright criminals.”

“Quite observant, aren’t you?” The elderly won’t woman said, chuckling a little. “The rest of your Marines are simply happy to not have bottles and cobblestones and other things thrown at them as they march around. Still, it’s an easy way to understand. While pirates might bring in a lot of beli and bootie to a place that is welcoming to them, they also bring a lot of trouble. And not just because of who and what they are, but what kind of services they look for.”

Momo looked confused for a moment, then Izuku got it. “Oh. You mean like bars and drug dealers and so forth?”

“More whore houses than either of those, but yes,” the woman said, before cackling as both midshipmen blushed rosily. “My word, but I can’t remember what it was like to be that innocent. Still, the point has to be said. Brothels, bars, drug dens and whore houses. You’ll see there are a lot of places that are locked up tight now. And, well, my husband’s going to be hiring a few ladies of formerly negotiable virtue soon to help with the workload here, especially now with that big order you paid for, young lady.”

The elderly matron shook her head. “Such women made a decent enough living before, but now that the pirates won’t be coming back here for a good decade or more after the drubbing you all gave them, they’ll need to find something else to do. The drug dealers and the rest, well, your officers seem to have a nose for that kind of thing, and the bars,” she chuckled again, looking into the bakery for a moment, her voice taking a decidedly smug tone. “Bar owners and bartenders are among the first to know which way the wind is blowing, and some of them at least were smart enough to always remember that here on the Grand Line, the wind

can be extremely unpredictable, and plan accordingly. The island will rebuild, better and cleaner now.”

She didn’t elaborate, so Momo thought it was some kind of inside joke or something that she didn’t have the knowledge to understand, at least and decided to move past it. “I see. Does that mean that when Admiral Garp moves on with the rest of us and a garrison comes in, that you all will welcome it?”

“Monkey D. Garp has a bit of her reputation. He’s not known as a Hero of the Marines for no reason.” The older woman replied, humming thoughtfully to herself. “And we old folks don’t like to cause waves. There might be a few hundred or so youngsters, young boys in particular, who might’ve looked up to the pirates and might cause trouble when they aren’t afraid of Garp’s Fist of Justice, but maybe not. The new marines may be good sorts, or they might not. The criminals might be gone, or they might not. We’ll see how it goes. So is the way of it for people like us. We trim sails and we survive come what may.”

Momo thought that admirable and said so, while the old woman shook her head and laughed at the idea. To her, that was simply a survival trait, nothing too grandiose, and nowhere near as heroic as women serving in the marines. “It would be no different if we knew that the Marine presence here wasn’t going to be a long-term one, and the pirates might come back. We simply trim sails, we simply work with whoever’s in charge and survive. That’s how life is here on the Grand Line.”

As the woman left, the two young folk turned their conversation to other matters, specifically, training and so forth. Garp had said they would be able to get at least a week’s worth of training in here on solid ground before the garrison arrived to replace them, and then they would be off again. Momo was looking forward to getting back into endurance training, as she had been given the okay right before the battle to do so, even if her shoulder remained unusable and her ribs were still healing.

Thankfully, the battering she had taken when she, Izuku and Jirou had been blunderbussed, as Jirou had put it, hadn’t set back the healing of her ribs thanks to the cast she had been wearing along with the Kevlar body armor. And while Momo was still weeks away from removing the full body cast, she could do endurance training with her legs at least. For his part, Izuku was looking forward to sparring more often with Admiral Garp. They haven’t been able to do much of that on the ship, simply because Garp was afraid he’d break the ship, and given what he had done to a large amount of the pirate fleet, that hadn’t been a joke. If anything, it had been understating things.

"I don't know whether to be envious or pity you," Momo quipped, causing Izuku to chuckle a little and admit that he wasn't certain either. Garp's delight at being able to have a full island to train the pair of personal students he'd taken on was kind of frightening.

Their conversation about training didn't keep their attention for very long. While Momo was almost as serious as Izuku about rising within the ranks of the marines and becoming a hero as best she could in this world, she knew that was years off. For now, she was more interested in listening to

Instead, it turned to the island itself, and what the two were hoping to find when they started to explore it. Izuku loved the idea of little mom-and-pop stores, always appreciating the natural touch. While Momo was looking forward to finding bookstores, small out-of-the-way parts shops. Little nooks and crannies like that fascinated Momo, Athens that she had seen as a little girl, although the local architecture was very different. That was how they had found this café.

Soon, they were done with their meal and the pot of tea and headed in to pay. They argued about it for a few moments laughingly, with Izuku joking, "After all, in this world, we're both as rich as one another right now."

Momo pouted severely at that. It wasn't her fault that she had taken so long to get used to what a beli was worth, or in point of fact, how much a yen was truly worth back on Earth. She had made up for it since, at least she thought so.

When she still tried to pay, Izuku deftly asked her where she wanted to go next, as they weren't due back at the makeshift billet until that afternoon. "I think you said something about wanting to go clothes shopping?"

"Well, I guess I did, but you're not going to deflect so easily, Zuk! I insist on at least paying half," Momo still tried to protest. The money she had put down for the other marines had been given to her by the bursar for that purpose. This was her own money, her portion of the money they had taken from the bounties for the Trump Pirates.

"But this way, you'll have more of your cash available to buy more clothing. Admittedly, I don't know where you would actually wear such clothing, as most of the time we need to wear our Marine uniforms while aboard ship, as Tenya mentioned last night when the idea came up. But I know that having more money at least will help," Izuku wheedled.

The minor argument was interrupted as the same woman from earlier laughed, shaking her head from her position behind the cash register. "My, willing to go shopping with you already, and arguing against you paying for something? He's a keeper, dearie, take it from me. I

wouldn't normally go for any kind of sailor, but since you are one yourself, I'd say keep him close, and make sure that he doesn't spend too much time ashore, if you get my drift."

Momo did indeed get her drift there and, combined with the idea that she and Izuku were a couple, found herself blushing even more than the woman's earlier comment about whorehouses had made her. *Not*, an insidious part of her mind thought, *that there was anything really wrong with the idea*. The problem was that she knew that Izuku and Melissa might well be a couple already, even if they hadn't actually had any romance-type moments since leaving Elena.

She stammered and backed away, trying hard to come up with the wording she needed to explain that, while Izuku just blushed, hastily paid, and tried to get away from the giggling older woman just as she opened her mouth. "In fact, if you are looking for a certain type of clothing store, I know where some---"

"T-thank you, we are good! We are not that, we are not a--" Izuku stumbled over his words.

Momo, filled with a sense of self-preservation in a way that she had not felt in a social situation for a good long while, grabbed Izuku's wrist and tugged him along quickly. "We really are decoupled, but thank you for the consideration, have a nice day!" She practically babbled, pulling Izuku out of the café.

Both of them were still incredibly red-faced and off balance, and perhaps that was why they both tripped as the pair went down the stairs. For a moment, Izuku's eyes widened, then his heroic tendency kicked in, and he quickly pulled Momo into a whirl in midair, so that she was above him as they fell down the stairs. That hurt a lot, but Izuku had been toughened to a tremendous degree even before coming into this world, so he was able to take the tumble down the steps with only a few bruises to show for it, while Momo would have fared far worse regardless of her cast.

What he wasn't able to do so well was to avoid looking into Momo's eyes as the tumble stopped with him underneath her, and Momo's body flushed to his own as she hissed in pain. Not just her chest, which would've been bad enough pressed into his own, those pillowy, soft, perfectly proportioned and formed breasts pressing into his upper chest. No, her whole body was pressed down into him, his arms around her waist, her head pressed into his shoulder, before she raised it to stare into his eyes from barely an inch away, so close that they could feel one another's breath, so close their noses were nearly touching.

Izuku simply stared, getting lost in Momo's eyes, as she too stared at him, her thoughts a jumble as the pain of the tumble subsided. *I've noticed his freckles before, but good grief! I thought they were somewhat amusingly cute when we first met on that first day, almost like the*

marks on a rabbit, which I felt was all too accurate, given his overall attitude. But now, he's lost what little baby fat he had left, and his face is so much more rugged and masculine. I've never used that word before, but good grief, does it work now. And his eyes, they gleam. You can just tell how smart he is just by looking at those eyes. And then there's his smile...

Oh my God, oh my God, her eyes are so pretty! I know Melissa's are pretty too, but Momo's are so expressive and deep. That black, it's like onyx, like her hair, like those lips, and oh my God! Oh my God! I'm nose to nose with one of the most intelligent, beautiful girls in the world! This one or our last one. What do I do, what do I do!?

Maybe if it had been Melissa on top of him, Izuku wouldn't be asking himself those questions, although even there, perhaps Izuku's normal self-effacing attitude and extreme lack of social experience would've had him frozen in place. But this was Momo, who, before meeting Melissa, had easily been the most attractive girl on a simply physical level that Izuku had ever met. Just as tellingly, she had very obviously been completely out of his league. Now, having gotten to know her, he found her just as attractive on an emotional level as he found Melissa.

How long the pair lay there at the bottom of the staircase up to the café neither knew, but eventually, it was interrupted by a group of café goers, who blinked and looked down at the pair of young Marines. "Um, are you two all right?" One of the three young women asked.

Momo blinked, stared up at them, then back down at Izuku, and yelped at the same time Izuku did, shifting away from one another and standing up rapidly, a move that caused Momo to wince in pain from her wounds. "We're fine, that is, we, erm we kind of tripped on the stairs, and well, thank you!" Momo stammered, power walking past the three older girls, while Izuku nodded along, hurrying after her.

The trip back to the barracks was quite awkward, both of them not really knowing what to say, and deciding internally without talking about it that the last few moments would go unremarked upon. They reached the barracks, and after a final smile, joined their friends and the other marines who had not been on night duty as they milled about the open area around the warehouse. With work on repairing the ship done and an overhaul only barely begun, the night watch was a token presence aboard ship, but the locals had yet to put together any kind of police force, so the marines were still patrolling the island at all hours, a task that took up a lot of their available numbers even if the hard part of doing so had passed.

Melissa and the others were already there, and Melissa took one look at her two younger friends and frowned, one eyebrow ticking upwards behind her glasses. Something was very obviously off about both of them, and she worked her way through the crowd until she was next to Izuku, grabbing his arm with one of hers.

He twitched, then blushed as he felt Melissa's chest press against his upper arm, but did not move away, instead giving Melissa the same kind of smile he had given Momo earlier that morning. Melissa returned it, giggling internally at the light hint of a blush that became visible on his cheeks as she did. "Are you okay?"

"I, um I just, I'm fine, why do you ask?" Izuku stammered, his blush disappearing and his face paling a bit.

Melissa had gotten used to Izuku's stutter back on the island, but she had also been extremely happy when he had begun to grow out of it. The fact that he was backsliding and blushing at the moment told her that something awkward had happened, but Melissa decided not to press for details. Better to just... to take his mind off things. And we haven't been able to, to talk about us since we boarded the Hound. "Well, I asked because, since we're free for the day, I'd like to go exploring today. I haven't had a chance to get out before this, and I know you haven't either."

She winked, and Izuku laughed, seeing as the pair of them had been working on the sails side by side the past few days. Indeed, while they hadn't had time to talk about anything personal, they had been able to talk about other things and just spend time sitting together, their hands working on the sails as their minds wandered, which had made the last few days fun, if not mentally challenging. *At least for me. My head might have been hurting a lot, but at least I could stand up and move around without groaning in pain.*

Melissa had been hit in the side of the head by a ricocheting piece of shrapnel from a cannonball hit on the Hound during the battle. It had thankfully lost most of its impetus, and despite bleeding so much she'd needed her bandages replaced several times during the battle, hadn't even left her post. After the battle, Quillo had diagnosed her with a very mild concussion, sprayed something on the wound, and that had been that.

"So I was wondering if you wanted to explore with me?" Melissa asked, before fighting hard to keep a blush off her face. *Good grief, but that could be taken differently than I meant! EEP!*

Izuku blinked, but the question was enough to get him out of his admittedly somewhat silly embarrassment about what had happened with Momo, and he nodded, missing the inadvertent double entendre, although a few marines close enough to hear Melissa had begun to choke for some reason. "I, yes! Of course, what kind of things are you interested in seeing here?"

"The same thing I'd be interested in on most islands: bookshops, mechanic shops, and any natural sights that are fun or just amazing. There has to be at least a few houses there that

are devoted to sightseeing or something like that up on the top of the mountain, right? What do they call that thing, anyway?"

"Mini-Reverse, for some reason. I've asked around, but most of the locals don't know why and the marines I've asked about it just laugh," Izuku confessed. "Er, as long as we really do have the full day off. I'd kind of expected Whitman, Yama or one of the others to volunteer us for something by this point..."

Turning away from Melissa, Izuku peered over the heads of the rest of the Marines for a moment, something he could do only by standing on his tiptoes. He was no longer one of the shortest boys around, but he wasn't exactly among the tallest of the marines either. *I'm happy I've added at least an inch or two since coming to this world with all the training and everything, but I can't wait to see how tall I can be! Considering my vague memories of how tall my sperm donor was, I might still have another foot or so to go before reaching my full height*, he thought, trying hard not to feel the normal amount of bitterness he always felt when he thought of his father.

To his surprise, none of the senior officers were anywhere to be seen. In fact, the only ones visible anywhere were Garland and his six corporals. Even as he watched, two carts arrived. The baker that Momo had made a deal with that morning had finished the first consignment of the order for the marines, and the marines cheered, seeing loaves of fresh bread and even whole rashers of bacon arriving, the carts being led by several good-looking women to boot.

Not that any of the marines would try anything with them. Garland was far more easygoing about a lot of things than most Master-At-Arms among the Marines, but Garp's orders on certain things were very clear. Anyone caught trying to press his affections on a woman was in for a very long session of kissing the gunner's daughter, if they were lucky.

Izuku smiled at that, but still looked a little confused about the lack of senior officers, wondering where they were.

Unknown to him and the rest, Garp was already out in the city, speaking to a few locals who had started to act like leaders among the local populace with the bursar. Whitman and Roland were taking time to call home and speak to their families, the pair of them being the only married men aboard. And Yama, Quillo, and Foril were all sleeping off a ridiculously sized bender, something of a tradition. Hence why they had organized this day as a free day for everyone but those marines on patrol duty. And Izuku's group of friends, only Kirishima, Shoto and Tenya were scheduled for such. Momo and Tsuyu had some exercises they needed to do for Quillo, but that was it.

Melissa wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Come on, let's go."

Elsewhere in the crowd, Momo watched Melissa and Izuku turn away, a feeling of annoyance and irritation filling her for a moment before she shook her head. A note had been left for her on the duty board stuck to the doorway into the inn where the girls were staying, stating that she was to stay in the area, to be available when Mr. Crawley returned. That put a halt to her plans for the day, unfortunately.

She stared after them for a few seconds before Jirou called her name. “Hey Yaomomo, you okay?”

“Mm? Somewhat annoyed, really. I had hoped to go exploring today, but apparently, that is not happening. What about yourself?”

“Well, heck, I’ll stay here with you then,” Jirou shook her head, holding one of the hundreds of fresh bagels the baker had made for them all. “Thanks for this, too, but as for my day, I think we might want to keep an eye on Mei. She’s got that crazy look in her eye again, and with Foril apparently sleeping off a hangover, someone needs to be on Mei-day wrangling duty, unless we want her to start taking apart the Hound in its entirety.”

That made Momo laugh, pulling her out of her funk. “Indeed! Well, then,” she said, linking her uninjured arm with her shorter best friend, knowing and happy that Jirou had decided to spend the day with her, rather than go out on her own as she could have. “Let us go find Mei, and make certain that she does not do anything that is not reversible, shall we?”

OOOOOOO

As they walked through the city, Izuku tried not to feel uncomfortable. He tried not to notice how close Melissa was standing, how every step she took seemed to take his attention away for a moment from his thoughts and from looking around them. How her smile took his breath away, the glint of her hair in the sunlight above, or how the flash of interest as they moved through the small out-of-the-way alleyways leading up the massive mountain that dominated the center of the island made his heart flutter.

He tried to ignore all this, because all of it equated to noticing that Melissa was a girl, and that in turn would remind Izuku that this particular girl had unequivocally stated that the two of them at already been on one date, and might be interested in more. And even that ‘might’ was down to what even Izuku could notice was his own self-deprecating nature, and did not take into account that Izuku knew he was attracted to and like Melissa. A lot.

In this mental effort, Izuku failed. Miserably. With every block that passed, with every joke they shared at the odd kind of colors that were being used in this area of the city, or how they had spotted several people who seem to be shouting ‘manly’ at one another in lieu of any

real communication as they repaired a battered building, the knowledge that he was out on what most would call a date with someone like Melissa was pressing in on Izuku.

And it was only their past interactions that allowed him to not stutter, not stammer, not smack himself to think it was a dream. A dream that someone as gorgeous, inside and out, as Melissa was could ever be interested in someone like Izuku, who still had trouble remembering he wasn't a Quirkless nobody any longer on a world where quirks determined your social standing.

For her part, Melissa was also having some trouble. Izuku wasn't quite a total and complete hunk as some girls back in their old dimension might've put it. His face was far plainer than the pretty boy faces that most girls on I-Island seemed to prefer. Well, that, and he wasn't 'daddy' material like some other girls seemed to prefer, but since she actually had a healthy relationship with her father, she'd never gone into that scene.

What he did have was muscles, intelligence, and a **lively** face. Which, coupled with those cute freckles, his general personality, and their friendship since they first met nearly five months ago? Well, Melissa had known for a while that she was attracted to Izuku. But acting on it, trying to work up the courage even now, was a little harder.

Come on, girl! Woman up. Izuku's not going to make the first move. You've made your interest plain, and he still blushes and barely can hold your arm, let alone anything else. Damn that Baka-boom buffoon to the deepest pits of Hell! Fucking asshole, no, don't think about what experiments you'd like to run on that asshat, you've never met him, never gonna. Focus on Izuku. Not how you'd like to kiss his freckles, or how fun it is to run your fingers through his hair. No, think about how to push this relationship of yours into the actual relationship category. Oooo... wait, is that a tech store?

As Melissa smiled at him and began to tug at his arm, her thoughts suddenly diverted as she motioned towards a shop with a sign that had little gears around it, Izuku's mind was running down something of the same sort of road, but he had a lot more experience by this point pushing through his mental baggage, and so, oddly was having a slightly easier time of it. *You're not a nobody any longer, Izuku, remember that!* A new, powerful side of his mind said to the vestiges of his past self.

Ye's it was confusing, but you aren't the useless Deku that Katsuki and the rest of the world told you you were before. And Melissa knows your secret! She knows about One For All, and she doesn't care! She doesn't think you're fake. Melissa's never acted like that. She's only ever acted like a friend should, from the first time you met her until now. And, yes, she's, um, hinted that she does want to be something more serious. But is there anything really wrong

with that? Sure, you might not be worthy of her, but that's a goal! Something to work for, just like anyone else would, right?

The shop was called North Blue Imports. According to the reading they'd all done up to this point, North Blue was, historically speaking, the most scientifically advanced of the five oceans. Mind you, Izuku wasn't so certain of that any longer, considering what they had learned about how the Grand Line was split in two, but the shop still should have had a great deal to offer.

The two teens put their thoughts on one another to the side for a few moments to look through the shop, yet still found themselves occasionally looking towards one another, then away, blushes appearing on their faces. And those looks were enough for Izuku to fall back to what he had been thinking about a moment before. *So, so with Melissa saying it was a date and everything, and maybe, maybe it's up to you to follow up? Is that how it's done? God dammit, I wish I'd read something over the years that would tell me how to act around girls! Why isn't there a handbook about this kind of thing!?*

On the other hand, Melissa had lost herself in the gears and such like on show. Many of the things in this store she hadn't seen since leaving Clockwork Island, and it was a relief to see it here, albeit a little strange to see it in a small out-of-the-way shop.

The shop itself also didn't have much in the way of wares, but what it did have was pretty darn good in her opinion. Not just in the type of gears, ampoules, and other things, but because of the lights. Heck, there was even a hand on one wall that shifted and twitched like a living hand under the direction of a clock connected to it nearby. That's almost like the one that Borodo had... was that his name? I can't remember, she reflected, before pausing, her heart and her suddenly beginning to thump as Izuku shifted around a nearly empty shelf to bump shoulders with her, his hand catching hers and squeezing.

"I, I don't think they have much on offer here, it's fascinating, but unless you find something to bring back to Mei that the two of you wouldn't be able to build yourselves, I wouldn't recommend spending your money here. No offense to the shopkeeper."

Melissa looked down at their joint hands, where Izuku had worked his fingers in between hers, instead of simply taking his hand in hers. The gesture was **far** more intimate feeling, and she found herself blushing like a little girl as she nodded shyly. "I, I yeah, the shop looked better on the outside than on the inside. I did see a few books over there on metallurgy that I want to pick up, but that's about it. We, we can pick those up on the way back if, if you have something else you want to do?"

Izuku nodded and gestured out the door. Melissa obligingly followed him, and the two continued on their way up the slanted hill, heading further up the mountain. "Was there

anything specific you were looking for?" Izuku asked, as they walked, making no move to release Melissa's hand from his own.

Something that Melissa was more than fine with. She was, in point of fact, extremely happy about Izuku stepping up like that, and now walked even closer, to the point where their shoulders rubbed every three or four steps. However, when she spoke, it was on the topic of discussion rather than their closeness.

"Yeah, I did. I was hoping to find more about guns and so forth in this world. I've never really gone into actual weapon building before; that was always more of a sideline for me. Mei's more your girl for that kind of thing, but even she, well, we are running into the issue of materials, you know? The whole need to make this kind of tool to make that kind of tool to make what we really want. Everything is just a bit too primitive here."

"You said you knew how to make a jet engine, but you didn't know the first thing about how to make a smithy, as an example of time, I think," Izuku said, mangling what Melissa had said, but getting the general gist of her argument when the group had been essentially shipwrecked on that first island.

She nodded, then gestured down to herself, smirking just a bit as Izuku's eyes followed the movement, a thrill going through her at the appreciation in his eyes. "Mei and I, we helped a decent amount in that fight, but we could've done better. We **should** have done better. If we're going to keep up with you and the others, we can't just be simple cannoneers or even scientists, or even shipwrights. We need to build weapon systems for ourselves that allow us to fight on that level. Mei might be strong, but she's never going to be the same kind of physical monster as you hear hero trainee types are. We need to become more."

Izuku was silent for a few moments as they came to an even more narrow area of the path they had been following, making their way up the mountain. So narrow was it that Melissa wondered if they were coming to a dead end. But the set of stairs ahead of them, which were so narrow that they actually had to release one another's hands to walk one by one up them rather than side-by-side, did eventually lead to another wider street, one marked with a sign that said Overlook and an arrow pointing in one direction.

As they walked side-by-side again, he began to speak again, looking at her sideways, although he didn't make any motion to take her hand again.

"You're amazing, you know that?" He said so suddenly that it took Melissa aback, the admiration in his voice making her flush a bit. "Of all of us, you and Mei have been the most impacted by coming to this new world. Your whole life revolved around technology, science and so forth, and all of that is so much further behind here in this world than it is in ours. Yet you just roll with it, just keep on moving forward. Not even just moving forward. You're willing to put

in the effort to become Marines, and not just Marines, but to keep up with the rest of us? That's amazing."

Melissa blushed, shaking her head, then deliberately thumped her shoulder into his. "Please! What's amazing is that you all want to still be heroes even in a world like this, where such things aren't exactly cut and dried. I'm not just talking about what Little Miss Assumed Name said, but the very nature of this world as a whole. You still want to make a difference on that kind of scale when you don't have the same kind of structure as back home. With all the limitations of being a marine it's going to be a far harder road, and I know you know that. Yet you never hesitated and haven't even after tall and mysterious did her best to poison our thoughts on the World Government and the Marines. None of you did."

Izuku scratched the back of his head for a second, looking away from Melissa for a moment as he thought about how to put it into words. He wasn't certain about how the other would-be heroes had made the jump from wanting to be heroes back home to willingly deciding to join up with the Marines. But for him, there really had never been any kind of choice there. His dream, his desire to become a hero, had driven him from such an early age on that he could no more fight it than he could fight the tide.

"I... back home, I wanted to be the symbol of peace. I never really cared about being the number one hero; the fame and acclaim didn't matter to me. All Might, he meant something beyond that. His smile, his presence. All of that screamed 'I am here' and it gave people a sense of security, a sense that everything was all right, even in the darkest of times."

He shook his head slowly. "I don't think this world needs or could use a symbol of peace. Just by its very nature, how hard it is to get around, there'll always be people and even whole corrupt governments and so forth to deal with. But maybe this world can use another symbol. Not a symbol of peace, but a symbol of hope. Hope for a brighter future, hope that things will get better. That's what I want to be in the future. And eventually, as we gain senior rank, not just for victims of pirates, but for victims of the World Government too, a symbol that even they can become better."

After a moment, Melissa snorted, giving him a sideways hug that caused Izuku to stiffen for a moment before she pulled back. "And you say I am the amazing one? With conviction like that, what am I supposed to do but follow you? What am I supposed to want to do but want to be by your side?" Melissa said, stammering the last few words, but putting as much sincerity into them as she could.

The smile she was rewarded with was brighter than the sun in her opinion and was more than enough payment for her momentary embarrassment, as she returned it wholeheartedly.

By mutual decision, the conversation shifted to something less intense for a while, going back to the idea of Melissa and Mei trying to figure out better weapons for themselves. Izuku was all for that, but also warned Melissa that she and Mei both needed to take the physical training that the Marines were offering seriously. The officers had proven beyond a shadow of a doubt how useful the Rokushiki was, let alone Haki. "I realize that you are trying to lean on your strengths, but don't lean on them so much that you miss other ways to become stronger in different ways."

Melissa grimaced at that but nodded, understanding that Izuku had a point. While neither she nor Mei was ever going to be the kind of 'musclebound meatheads' as Mei had put it at one point, that the Marines seemed to want to force them to become, it would be foolish of her and her fellow gearhead to ignore that kind of training. *Especially after the battle. The officers were all on defense, and made such a difference that one ship slaughtered a whole fleet of enemy ships.*

The two of them were stunned into silence a moment later as they came around the corner and found themselves staring out over the island. The Lookout wasn't a tower with a view like they had thought. It was simply a portion of the road that had nothing else built on it, which thus allowed you to simply stare out over the rest of the island from near the top of the mountain. It almost reminded Melissa of lookouts she had once seen in America while driving around with her father, but the view was still amazing, letting you stare down onto the rest of the city below and one of the mountains beyond it, with the blue of the ocean providing a magnificent backdrop to the green of the mountain.

"Wow!" Izuku breathed, staring at the vista.

"I know. If I were any kind of artist, I'd want to see if I could paint this view. I'm not, so I think I'll just..." Melissa began, moving forward, before sitting down on the side of a safety wall that looked almost like the balustrades that wouldn't look out of place on a castle somewhere. Izuku sat next to her, and after a few moments as they took in the view, Melissa leaned sideways, letting her rest on his shoulder.

Despite the handholding earlier, Izuku had to fight his instincts to not stiffen up for a moment at that gesture, but he didn't. Instead, he slowly, hesitantly shifted a bit, then wound an arm around Melissa's side, pulling her into him. The pair of them sat there for some time, and then Melissa turned to look at Izuku. Izuku turned to look down at her, and then, closing her eyes, Melissa leaned upwards.

Izuku blushed, but a portion of his mind older than the sentient part of his brain took over, pushing through the still-confused portions of his mind, while the portion of his mind most impacted by his experiences in this world reminded his older instincts of his mind with a

very large stick that it had been quite obvious for a while the Melissa felt this way. And that Izuku felt the same towards Melissa in turn, regardless of how much fun he had with Momo or Jirou.

Act on it! Act on it now or forever hold your peace! That aspect of his consciousness shouted, and the rest of Izuku could do no more than obey.

Trying to ignore the sound of Nana in his mind going, “*WOO, you go Nine!*” he leaned down, closing his eyes. The two of them almost bumped noses, so inexperienced were the pair. But instead, Izuku felt his nose sliding along Melissa’s for just a second before their lips made contact.

Izuku had never kissed anyone but his mom on the cheek before this. And even that had been quite rare. Feeling someone else’s lips on his own, the softness of them, the softness of Melissa leaning into him as she was, was an amazingly phenomenal, almost overwhelming feeling. He simply sat there for a moment, pressing his own lips into hers, uncertain what else to do.

Melissa felt somewhat overwhelmed as well, although she at least had a good deal of book learning to fall back on. As she felt Izuku’s lips against hers, firmer than she knew her own to be, smaller than she knew her mouth to be, the experience entirely new yet extremely pleasant, Melissa began to shift her lips just a little. She moved them this way and that, keeping the pressure on, engaging with the kiss without deepening it. She found herself twisting slightly, pushing more of her body up into Izuku’s side, as he turned to face her, winding his arms around her, pulling her in tighter.

Eventually, the need to breathe reared its head, and Melissa slowly began to back away, shoulders, wondering idly when one of her hands had found its way into his hair, and remarking internally that yes, a boy having hair like that needed to be illegal. *It’s just so soft and fluffy!* Deciding to leave that hand where it was, Melissa smiled up at Izuku, a lazy, seemingly seductive smile to Izuku’s current frame of mind. “Well, that was nice.”

Izuku nodded numbly, then blurted, “Will you be my girlfriend!? That should’ve come first, but I, I... I’m doing this out of order, but I...”

“Yes, Izuku, I will be your girlfriend,” Melissa giggled, leaning in to kiss him again. That kiss became a third, then a fourth. The two of them spent the rest of the evening sitting there, just taking in the sights, kissing and hugging one another, ignoring the few passersby who took in the romantic scene, settling into this new relationship.

OOOOOOO

Over the next few days, as Garp began to spend more time training Izuku and Kirishima while the other officers did similarly with the other teens, the new dynamic between Melissa and Izuku went unnoticed by the majority of their friends.

Not at all what you might call quick on the uptake about romance, Shoto wasn't all that observant when it came to social dynamics, although he did notice that Izuku seemed to have a tendency to smile more widely these days for some reason. Tenya and Kirishima similarly simply didn't notice anything, far too pleased with the training they were getting and far too exhausted from that training most of the time to put any effort into such things. Mei was Mei, and when it came to normal social niceties, she always marked the 'unapplicable' box.

If the rest of the other marines noticed, none commented. Not even the other midshipmen, who included many a young man who had tried to flirt with Melissa since she came aboard, seemed to notice or were willing to comment. This was an unwritten rule aboard any marine vessel. No public displays of affection, and no jokes about people being in relationships or anything similar. Such were seen as an example of bad discipline, something no good captain allowed.

In contrast, Tsuyu noticed, and actually was the first to congratulate them, doing so as Izuku and Melissa broke off to head to their respective barracks rooms two nights later. Jirou and Momo noticed early the next day, but they didn't say anything one way or another. Momo still had that strange feeling, a feeling of both happiness and annoyance going through her, or rather, two separate feelings fighting it out within her, although she had still not really internalized why she felt annoyed seeing Izuku with Melissa.

Jirou had. She was jealous, plain and simple. Unlike Momo, Kyoka had run into that feeling before more than enough to recognize it. However, in her case, rather than thinking she wanted to be in Melissa's spot, Kyoka thought she wanted to be in Izuku's. Melissa was incredibly attractive after all. Even better, two days of watching the dopey smiles and the hidden glances Melissa and Izuku shared fueled Jirou's own desires enough for her to act on them.

That day, Kyoka switched duties with one of the other teams of investigators that Garland had put together. They had basically found all the hidden caches and so forth on the island by this point. What was left was basically cleanup duty and questioning some of the locals about specific pirate bands that had come through, and training a local constabulary. Since Kyoka didn't have much knowledge about the specific pirate bond bands, and her powers weren't all that useful except for detecting whether or not someone was nervous, she was able to switch out with one of the other marines.

In contrast, Momo's work with Mr. Crawly could not be avoided, but didn't take her very long, as the two of them had been working on the specifics of putting a marine garrison on the

island full-time since Garp's meeting with the locals the same day Melissa and Izuku had gotten together. Thus, after a morning's training, she would finally be free to explore the town.

Kyoka approached Momo as the pair of them entered some of the shower stalls that had been jerry-rigged for the Marines, as neither of the inns Mr. Crawley had made agreements with offered such. This had simply been a set of buckets and tubes before Mei got a hold of it, and it had taken her and Melissa only half a day to make permanent showers, complete with hot water.

"Hey Momo, do you have any plans for the day?" the shorter girl asked, twirling one of her earjacks between her fingers as she tried to look everywhere but at Momo's toweled form. *Right now, I do not need to be turned into a stuttering, blushing mess, thank you so much.* "Only, I haven't gotten a chance to go exploring since we arrived, but I'm free all afternoon, so..."

Momo blinked, turning to look over at her, taking in Kyo-chan's equally towel-covered body for a moment, a strange series of emotions going through her. Interest? Intrigue? Momo wasn't certain. But she had always enjoyed looking at Kyo-chan before this, particularly Kyo-chan's rear, which, as Melissa and the others had pointed out to her back on the jungle island they had first lived on after arriving in this world, was a magnificent sight to see. *I've seen her naked before this, but now I suddenly want to see it again...odd.*

If Kyo-chan had been a boy, Momo would easily have been able to internalize what she was feeling right now. But given her sheltered upbringing, and how controlling her parents had been even of the things she could read, Momo legitimately did not understand what she was feeling towards Kyoka. Well, besides seeing the other girl as her best friend ever of all time, anyway. But even in that light, there was only one response to the shorter girl's question Momo could give.

"Mah, I would be delighted! With training having stepped up, I haven't had the chance to explore the island either. Going exploring with a friend always sounds better than going on my own," she answered excitedly, almost bouncing on her toes for a moment.

"That's what I was thinking, yeah," Kyoka said, some of her shyness leaving her in the face of Momo in bubbly mode. "I mean, I've seen a lot of the island, but well, what I've been looking for has been remarkably different than simply just taking in the sights, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, I do! That would be like reading for work and reading for pleasure. They are two very different things," Momo said, smiling even more happily. "Excellent! Do you have anything you are looking for in particular?"

"Maybe an instrument store of some kind? I haven't played anything since we arrived in this world. I realized that last night, and my fingers started to twitch," Kyoka said jokingly, fighting the urge to follow Momo into her shower stall for a moment, pushing that desire aside to enter the one next to her, while the other girls moved around them to their own stalls. This left the two girls to their own devices for a moment as Tsuyu was arguing with Melissa and Mei about something to do with footwear.

"That sounds lovely! I remember listening to you play when you and I went to the store that your parents run back in Mustafu. I was almost afraid you would stop playing because of... well... everything that's happened since we reached I-Island," Momo confessed as she turned on the shower.

"I kind of had. Music was so big a part of how my parents and I connected, but I, I need to leave that pain behind. I'm just sort of afraid that we won't find anything like that on this island. I've not heard any music or anything beyond bugles and the occasional drum calling time for workers since we arrived here. Heck, I can't remember a time when I did hear anything like that since Clockwork Island."

"Actually, music is a part of life on most ships. They'll usually have one or two people that sing a shanty or play an instrument, if only to help work gangs keep time," Tsuyu volunteered from nearby, trying to extricate herself from the conversation with Melissa and Mei. It didn't work.

"Well, we haven't seen much of that," Kyoka muttered. "The marines don't seem to go into it much."

"Perhaps, or perhaps that was simply because all of the Marines aboard the Hound knew they were coming into a hard fight. Maybe from now on, we'll see a laidback attitude aboard ship? Who knows. But going to that kind of store with you again sounds fun regardless." Momo said, dunking her head into the shower, allowing the water to sluice down her hair and the front of her body. Her shoulder was currently still in a smaller brace Quillo had made her for her showers, but thanks to the nature of her cast Momo could at least get clean.

Having seen the top of her head duck down, Kyoka tried hard not to be jealous of the water. *God, I've got it bad!* "Thanks. And actually, I even know a place where we could eat an early dinner, if you want. Melissa mentioned how she and Izuku found this Overlook place the other day, but there's actually a café right underneath it. It's built into the side of the mountain and has its own little terrace there, where lots of cats seem to congregate for some reason."

For a second, Momo felt a stab of that other darker emotion, unaccompanied by the more confused, happy emotion that she also normally felt when she thought of Melissa and

Izuku being out and about together. But the mention of cats swept that aside, and Momo agreed with the idea instantly.

Soon, with Melissa helping Momo back into her body cast, both girls were dressed in off-duty outfits. For Kyoka, this was a pair of jeans and a cropped shirt that looked vaguely punk, hence why she bought it. Momo wore a sundress that contrasted sharply with Kyoka's style but fit her remarkably well, letting her legs bare below the knee, and hugging her form a little bit, but not much, thanks to the cast.

For a brief second, the contrast in their styles made Kyoka wonder if this was the universe's way of saying something to her, but before she could lose herself in her insecurities, Momo grabbed Kyoka's arm and tugged her towards the entrance to the barracks. "Come on! Let's get out of here before Roland or one of the others decides there's some minor little duty that they want to lay on us."

Roland had finally recovered the ability to stand up that morning and had taken over command of the crew once more. This let Garp... well, torture Kirishima and Izuku in the name of training, in Kyoka's opinion, without needing to do anything else.

Kyoka nodded, and grinning, wrapped her own arm around Momo's uninjured one. The two of them walked arm in arm, laughing as they did indeed see Roland look her way, his mouth open, before they were down the street and away from the open area in front of the warehouse the marines had taken over. Seeing that they both sped up until they were almost racing away from the makeshift barracks, giggling all the while.

Unfortunately for Kyoka, her mission to find a music store kind of stalled out. There were music stores here, but most of them had been, not ransacked, as the pirates did astonishingly pay for what they took for the most part, but left with little. There was not a single stringed instrument to be found anywhere, and those were Kyoka's preference as she confessed to Momo after they left the fifth such shop. "I mean, I know percussion has its place, but I never got into the drums or anything similar. Guitars, Electric or acoustic, would be my preference, although I could play anything with strings. Heck, even play the violin if I have to."

"For my part, the only instrument I was ever taught as a child was the piano. I confess that I wasn't all that good at it, to the point where my parents decided it was a worthless exercise, despite the fact that I truly enjoyed it," Momo said, her face shifting into a scowl as Kyoka thought unkind things about her rich friend's parents.

Over the months since they had become friends, it had become very clear that Momo's parents hadn't been all that well parenting in comparison to Kyoka's. To Kyoka's way of thinking, they had treated Momo more like an addition or a tool for their own social interactions. As if having a daughter or son had simply been a checkmark they needed to achieve being who and

what they were than actually something they wanted. The less said about their thoughts on her becoming a hero, the better.

Setting those thoughts aside, Kyoka simply shook her head. "In that case, I'll need to find a violin, or perhaps a cello? I'm not so good with the cello, but they both go better with piano."

"HAH!" Momo laughed. "Actually, I think a piano and a guitar can make wonderful music together. You haven't listened to a lot of the European rock bands that I heard traveling around the world with my parents. Admittedly, most of the time they didn't know I was listening in, but the local servants weren't nearly as well acquainted with the rules about what I should and should not be allowed to listen to. Sometimes the maids in the mansions we stayed in even went about their business listening to local bands on a radio."

Kyoka blushed a little at the implication of the two of them making wonderful music together. That sounded like something straight out of her father's flirtations with her mother, at least according to the woman in question. At the time her mother told her that story, Kyoka had thought it remarkably lame, but now, coming from Momo, there could only be one response. "I'd like us to try anyway. That sounds like a lot of fun."

Not understanding why Kyoka was blushing, Momo simply nodded firm agreement, and the two of them continued to explore. They tried two more music shops and actually did find a piano in one of them, but it was a busted-up thing, which the store owner was in the process of repairing.

"It got in the way of a fight that broke out at one point, along with the person using it. The piano at least survived, if in a battered form," the man said, shaking his head as he looked over at where he had opened up the side of the piano, and the sheer number of broken strings and bits and pieces inside. "It's a pity because this piano was once someone's pride and joy, and I don't think even I will be able to repair it nearly as adequately as it was made in the first place."

That put Kyoka in a slightly depressed frame of mind, but she didn't remain so. It was far too nice a day, and Momo standing beside her was far too much of a distraction. Eventually, they set Kyoka's quest on the side and instead turned their attention to finding more dictionaries for Momo's collection. She still had room to spare in her sea chest and wanted to fill it with as many dictionaries as she possibly could.

They did find a few, and Momo cheerfully bought them and a small hip bag to put them in, in a way that made it clear that she didn't know how horribly that clashed with the rest of her current outfit. That only made Kyoka smile more, and Momo smiled back in turn, the two girls having had a remarkably fun time, talking about everything and sundry as they explored.

Now, though, Momo's stomach broke the moment, letting loose a loud gurgling noise. Kyoka laughed as Momo blushed, looking around for a moment. "Come on, I think if we go this way and further up, we'll reach that restaurant I told you about."

Nodding, Momo followed the other girl, oddly finding her eyes shifting downwards for brief moments to Kyoka's pant-clad rear before she shook off the sudden thought. Food was more important than such strange, odd thoughts for the moment.

The two ladies eventually found the way up to the restaurant that Kyoka had heard about, finding it still somewhat dilapidated despite the best efforts of the owners. It had apparently been a favorite place for the pirates, and the scars of the pirates' presence were evident. However, that patronage had given the restaurant owners a lot of money to help with the repairs and freshening up the restaurant's look, and the cats had never gone away.

Cats were good luck to any sailor. Having one or two aboard a ship was a common thing. Working cats, of course. Cats that could hunt down rats and mice, that could protect stores and be trained not to leave anything behind. So even pirates wouldn't go out of their way to anger or even annoy cats, even while in port.

Thus, both Kyoka and Momo found themselves ensconced in a small booth, the side of which was open to the mountainside and the cityscape around them, a calico and a gray-furred cat curled up in their laps.

"Mm, this is true happiness," Momo murmured, smiling over at her friend. They'd decided to sit on one side of the booth so they could both stare out over the view, similar to what Melissa and Izuku had done four nights ago. Although the view from down here didn't show quite as large a vista, it did actually allow them to see more of the cityscape below them, and of course, there were the cats to consider. "This is amazing."

"Yeah, it is. This whole day, I think we both needed some time off from mathematics, learning, and well, killing ourselves with training," Kyoka muttered, and couldn't stop herself. She leaned sideways, pressing her shoulder into Momo's uninjured one. Momo returned the gesture, allowing her head to fall sideways onto the top of Kyoka's, as they both concentrated on the cats while they waited for their food.

As they waited, Kyoka and Momo learned they had a semi-past time in common. They liked to make up stories about little things that people were doing, which they found funny while people-watching. For example, Momo pointed out that one person was walking around down below with what looked like half of a mascot costume on, while someone else was running after him, saying that he was obviously a wanted criminal trying to hide in plain sight.

Kyoka countered this story by pointing to where a woman was shrieking at someone else at a balcony several stories below their current perch. “No, Anton, don’t go! I love you!”

“But Mei, why then do you insist on putting out that pastel-hued yellow everywhere! It’s disgusting!”

“Don’t blame me for the fact that your eyes can’t see the true glory of pastel hues!”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn about your opinion, because it sucks!” Kyoka said, her jacks twitching this way and that as she pantomimed both sides of the conversation that she was imagining was going on down there. She couldn’t actually hear anything, although she had heard the woman shout about something being a job, which was enough to make sure that she didn’t want to hear anything else.

Momo laughed gaily, shaking her head, and the food arrived, drawing both of their attention. Momo quickly dug into her normal massive portion, to the surprise of the waiter who had delivered it, having expected the two girls to have been joined by someone else to help them eat the massive portions that the pair had ordered. Meanwhile, Kyoka turned her attention to the jambalaya pasta that she had ordered. That was actually his name, jambalaya pasta. And it was delicious.

As they ate, the conversation continued, with euro pointing out other groups of amusing people down below, including one group of boys who are very clearly acting out the pirates of parts of pirates of Marines, and another boy who had seemingly been trying to climb down from a second-story window, only to be grabbed by the shirt by his mother and pulled inside.

As they talked, the two cats left, and the girls were pressing into one another closer now, sharing food and laughing, with Momo not noticing the romantic atmosphere for the most part, while Kyoka certainly did. *This is it, this is it! I’ve set it up, Momo’s gone along with everything, this is about as romantic of moment as I can get. It’s now or never,* she thought, but the words wouldn’t come to her. The words just wouldn’t come.

Instead, Kyoka kept on joking and laughing, as the food began to disappear. As the afternoon wore on and they would need to return to the barracks to check in for the evening. *Come on, come on, Kyoka, do it! Say it.*

But still, the words would not come. Kyoka couldn’t just outright say it, but, turning her head to look at Momo as she laughed and looked out in the distance, Kyoka decided that actions would need to work. She licked her lips, watching as Momo’s eyes flicked down to Kyoka’s face from the landscape ahead of them, one eyebrow rising. But she didn’t do anything as Kyoka slowly shifted upwards, leaning up towards her.

However, before anything could happen, a bellowing voice broke Kyoka's attention, and caused Momo to shift away, staring out and downwards over the edge of the balcony. "There you two are! Dammit, we've been trying to find you everywhere! I even had to use my Kenbunshoku to find the pair of you. You left the barracks without a Den Den Mushi. There's been a change of plans. We're heading out with the evening tide. At this point, you two'll actually be the last to return."

Actually, technically speaking, Garp should've waited until morning, because the vice admiral and the garrison being sent to occupy the island wouldn't arrive until then. But Garp had been informed barely an hour ago of who that Vice Admiral was, and he very much did not want to be here when Doberman arrived. He was one of those idiots who followed the Absolute Justice ideal, and Garp had very little truck with any of them.

Moreover, he very, very much did not want the kids to be here when that moron took over. The locals were not going to be happy, but there was nothing Garp could do about it. He had his orders, and that was all there was to it, although that would not stop him from smashing Doberman's face in if he tried to pouch the kids away from Garp.

At present of course, Kyoka and Momo didn't know all of that. Kyoka's face flushed red from embarrassment at the interruption, a red that swiftly shifted into a deeper, darker red in anger as she stood up. "Dammit, Garp!" She shouted, having learned like the others that Garp had no truck with formality most of the time. His crew could put on a show for the locals or for pirates, but that was all it was to Garp, a show. "You could've waited for a few more moments! I am going to stab you, you idiot, see how your durability does when my sound's shaking you apart!"

Garp simply laughed at the threat, shaking his head as he spoke around a bit of rice cracker. "It'll be an interesting experiment to see if your earjacks can even get through my skin. Come on, get moving!"

While Kyoka was shouting, Momo raised a hand to her chest, which had begun to beat wildly for a second. The look on Kyoka's face was one she had never seen before there. That was the same expression she had seen on Izuku's face when the two of them had their little accident in the stairwell of the café, and when Izuku and Melissa had returned that day three nights ago, Momo had seen the pair exchange a look similar to that.

*Is, is Kyo-chan attracted to me? Is that **possible**!? Between two girls? But if so...*

That revelation put everything that had happened that day and a lot of other things, a lot of other little moments of interaction that she and Kyoka had shared in a new light. As well as putting Momo's own feelings towards the other girl into perspective. And as it did, this in turn opened up a whole new world to Momo. It put her own emotions into perspective, the

closeness, the desire to be around Kyoka, the delight she had in Kyoka's company, not just as another person, but as someone to laugh with, to cuddle with, to be physically close with in an entirely different category in her mind.

Momo didn't know if she was in love with the other girl. She had never been in love, so she did not have anything to compare it to. *However, I can definitely say that Kyoka is my favorite person in the world, with Izuku and Melissa in close contention, admittedly, but the two of them are together, and I should be happy about it. To boot, I am closer to Kyo-chan than I am to any of my other dear friends. Now, with all that said, and with the understanding that, oh my, girls can like one another in that manner, what should I do?*

This question did not take long to answer, and Momo's face firmed.

Kyoka was still in the dumps as Momo flung down enough beli to cover the meal along with an exceedingly generous tip. In point of fact, it was three days' worth of pay for a regular marine, not that Momo really noticed or cared. The group of them had been very well-off, given the amount of money they'd earned from the bounties on the Trump Pirates, and they hadn't really spent much of it in Elena. They had admittedly spent a good deal of it here on this island in terms of clothing for the girls and some other odds and ends for the boys, although they also needed clothing in the form of underwear, more than anything else, but that still left them relatively well-off, especially in comparison to the other marines.

The shorter-haired girl didn't notice as Momo began to tug her along. She didn't notice, stewing in her frustration, as Momo thanked the restaurant owners in the waiters for a lovely time before apologizing as they needed to hurry out, and she didn't notice anything but her own anger until they were out of the restaurant.

At which point she very much **did** notice when Momo jerked them both to a halt in the small alleyway leading up to the restaurant. Because it was that moment when Momo pulled Kyoka into a hug with her uninjured arm.

Hesitantly, Kyoka hugged Momo back gently, wondering where this was coming from and somewhat annoyed at the feel of the cast underneath Momo's sundress, but Momo's words into her hair lit a fire inside Kyoka that had begun to die out with Garp's shout. "I, I think you were about to, to do something, weren't you, Kyo-chan? I, I ask because I think you were, I would in no way reject such things from you," Momo said, her own words stumbling over themselves. Like Melissa and Izuku, she'd never been in this position before, and very much had no idea what to really say.

Kyoka blushed, then slowly nodded, the courage rising within her as she craned her neck to look up at the taller girl. "I, I like you, Momo. I've liked you for a while. As an I, um, **like**, you know?"

“Good! I was afraid I was missing the signals, or they were just wrong. In that case, I like you too! I think I’ve liked you for a long while, but I sort of didn’t realize it was possible. I blame my upbringing for that one. But for now...” With that, Momo very firmly leaned down, and Kyoka, her eyes widening, hastened to lean upward.

Soft lips met soft lips, as their arms tightened around one another, their lips questing, pressing, and suddenly opening as Momo flicked out a tongue against Kyoka’s lips. Kyoka gasped, which allowed Momo to initiate contact, kissing the life out of the shorter girl for several seconds until Kyoka got her balance back under her and began to give as good as she got. The two of them stayed there for several moments, the rest of the world falling away, until a ribald comment of “Get a room, you two!” interrupted them from a group of restaurant goers going past them.

Kyoka whirled away from Momo, her earjacks out and flashing towards the group, who yelped and raced upwards away from the pair, but she was pulled back into Momo’s one-armed hug, the taller girl giggling. “Oh, leave them be. We did seem to forget where we were for a moment.”

At that, Kyoka’s shock of anger subsided, and she found herself laughing too, and the two of them stood, hugging one another for a time, laughing quietly until they got themselves under control and began to move again, holding hands now as they came out of the stairwell to find Garp waiting for them, his bag of rice crackers done and a foot tapping impatiently.

“Good news, Garp, I no longer wish to stab you,” Kyoka said, causing Momo to nearly collapse into laughter again, tightening her hug around the younger girl.

Garp blinked, then laughed, shrugging. “Well, that’s good, I guess, happy for you both and whatever. Although it still would’ve been an interesting experiment.”

Rolling her eyes, Kyoka fell into step with the larger man with Momo on her other side. Normally, this would have made Kyoka feel short, but right now, she felt about as big as a giant. The three of them headed back down to the docks below, both girls wondering what other adventures would wake them on this ocean, but like Izuku and Melissa, very happy that they would be facing them together, not just as friends, but as a couple. Right now, that was all that mattered.

End Chapter