

Sup.

Chapter 6 over here.

Do enjoy

Start

Naruto's ears were still ringing from the cannon blast when he found himself sprawled across the Interceptor's deck, his duel with Captain Pendragon abruptly forgotten in the chaos of the Pearl's surprise attack. The supernatural energy that had been building between them moments before dissipated like morning mist, leaving only the acrid smell of gunpowder and the urgent shouts of sailors scrambling for battle stations.

That was too close, he thought, pushing himself up on his elbows while trying to shake the disorientation from his head. The Fox's energy was still coursing through him, making everything seem sharper, more immediate, but also more overwhelming.

"All hands, battle stations!" Jack's voice cut through the pandemonium, the pirate captain somehow managing to sound both urgent and theatrical as he spun the Interceptor's wheel hard to port. "And somebody tell me why we didn't spot them approaching!"

The HMS Excalibur was experiencing similar chaos, her crew abandoning their positions as spectators and rushing back to their duties with military precision. Through the forest of moving bodies, Naruto caught sight of Norrington at the rail of his ship, one hand extended toward Elizabeth in a gesture that was both protective and expectant.

But Elizabeth wasn't moving toward the commodore's outstretched hand. Instead, she was rushing back toward Will, her face pale with fear but her determination unmistakable. The look of disappointment and frustration that crossed Norrington's features would have been almost comical under different circumstances.

Interesting romantic dynamics, Naruto noted absently, though his attention was quickly drawn elsewhere.

Captain Artoria Pendragon stood amidst the chaos like a pillar of calm in a hurricane. While everyone else scrambled and shouted and rushed about in barely controlled panic, she remained perfectly composed, her green eyes scanning the approaching Black Pearl with the calculating gaze of a seasoned warrior assessing a new threat.

There was something mesmerizing about her poise, the way she seemed untouched by the disorder surrounding her. For the first time since their duel began, Naruto was able to truly look at her - not as an opponent to be fought, but as another being displaced in this strange world.

She really does have that look, he thought, studying her profile as she turned to observe the Pearl's approach. *That sense of not quite belonging, of being something more than what this world expects.*

The Fox had been right - she wasn't entirely human, at least not in the way this world understood humanity. There was an otherness about her that resonated with his own displaced soul, a recognition that transcended their current antagonistic circumstances.

"**MOVE!**" the Fox's voice exploded in his mind with such force that Naruto threw himself sideways without conscious thought.

The cannonball whistled through the space where his head had been moments before, striking the deck with enough force to send wooden splinters flying in all directions. The Interceptor lurched violently to starboard, and Naruto found himself sliding across the tilted deck until something caught his collar and hauled him upright.

Captain Pendragon's grip was surprisingly strong as she pulled him to his feet, her expression mixing professional concern with what might have been mild amusement. "Under other circumstances," she said calmly, as if they weren't currently being bombarded by cursed pirates, "I'd have you in manacles by now."

Naruto couldn't help but chuckle despite their dire situation. "Well then, I guess we'd better resume our fight after this is over. Can't have you feeling like you missed your chance."

Something that might have been approval flickered across her features before her attention returned to their tactical situation. "The Black Pearl is closing fast," she observed, releasing his collar and moving toward the rail. "She's not alone."

She was right. Through the smoke and chaos, Naruto could see at least three other vessels approaching from different angles, all flying the same black colors as Barbossa's flagship. The cursed captain had learned from their earlier escape and was ensuring they had nowhere to run this time.

The Pearl loomed larger by the moment, her black sails somehow catching wind that didn't seem to exist for the other ships. Even at this distance, Naruto could make out the skeletal figures moving about her deck with inhuman coordination.

"This is bad," the Fox observed with characteristic understatement. "Fighting one supernatural naval officer was challenging enough. Now we've got cursed pirates attacking while we're still dealing with her."

Could be worse, Naruto thought back, watching as both crews prepared for the inevitable battle. *At least Captain Pendragon seems more interested in fighting the Pearl than capturing us at the moment.*

"Don't count on that lasting," the Fox warned. "The moment this threat passes, she'll be back to fulfilling her mysterious orders."

Captain Pendragon had moved to confer with Norrington, their voices low but urgent as they apparently coordinated some kind of joint defense. Whatever personal agenda had brought her here, she was clearly professional enough to prioritize immediate survival over capture missions.

The Black Pearl fired another broadside, this one more accurate than the last. Several shots struck the Interceptor's hull, sending shudders through the entire vessel, while others sent up geysers of seawater dangerously close to the HMS Excalibur.

"Return fire!" Jack commanded, though Naruto could see the futility in his expression. The Interceptor's modest armament was no match for the Pearl's supernatural arsenal, and everyone aboard knew it.

As the two ships braced themselves for the approaching storm of cursed pirates and supernatural combat, Naruto found himself standing beside Captain Pendragon at the rail, both of them studying their mutual enemy with professional interest.

"Truce?" he asked quietly, not taking his eyes off the Pearl's approaching form.

"Temporary alliance," she corrected, her hand moving to rest on her invisible sword's hilt. "Until the immediate threat is resolved."

Naruto grinned, feeling the familiar surge of adrenaline that came before a really good fight. "Works for me. Try to keep up."

The Black Pearl was almost within boarding range now, her cursed crew already preparing grappling hooks and boarding planks. Whatever came next, it was going to be spectacular, dangerous, and probably insane.

Just the way Naruto liked it.

AROUND THE SAME TIME...

Jack Sparrow had always prided himself on maintaining a philosophical outlook when faced with impossible odds. It was, he'd found, the key to survival in a profession that regularly involved

cursed treasures, supernatural entities, and the occasional kraken. But as he spun the Interceptor's wheel hard to starboard while three ships full of undead pirates closed in from all directions, his philosophical reserves were running dangerously low.

This is what I get for helping people, he thought bitterly, watching the Black Pearl's ominous silhouette grow larger by the moment. *One simple rescue mission, and suddenly I'm trapped between cursed pirates and the Royal Navy with nowhere to run.*

The irony wasn't lost on him that just hours ago he'd been lamenting the loss of his beloved Pearl to Barbossa's mutinous crew. Now she was bearing down on him with supernatural speed, her cursed captain no doubt eager to reclaim both the Aztec medallion and whatever blood was needed to complete their ritual.

"Mr. Gibbs!" he called out, never taking his eyes off their approaching enemies. "Load every gun and run out the cannons! If we're going to die today, let's at least make it expensive for them!"

The HMS Excalibur was maneuvering alongside them now, Norrington apparently having decided that immediate survival took precedence over arresting pirates. *Smart man*, Jack admitted grudgingly. *Though I suspect this temporary alliance will become decidedly less temporary once the shooting stops.*

At least they had firepower on their side now. The Excalibur was a proper ship of the line, her guns significantly more intimidating than the Interceptor's modest armament. More importantly, they had Captain Pendragon - whatever she was, supernatural abilities would be useful against opponents who couldn't die by conventional means.

Speaking of supernatural allies, Jack's gaze found Uzumaki near the mainmast, apparently conferring with their mysterious naval captain. The boy was their only crew member who could match the cursed pirates' unnatural abilities, which meant keeping him alive and functional was now Jack's primary tactical concern.

The revelation about the Aztec curse had been one card played from his carefully guarded hand. There were others - information about Will's true importance to the ritual, the specific

blood requirements for breaking the curse, his own complicated history with both the treasure and Bootstrap Bill. But those secrets were too valuable to reveal unless absolutely necessary.

One crisis at a time, he reminded himself, adjusting their heading to keep the wind in their favor. *Deal with the immediate threat of supernatural piracy first, worry about long-term imprisonment later.*

The Black Pearl fired another broadside, her aim improving with each volley. Several shots struck uncomfortably close to the Interceptor's waterline, and Jack could hear the ominous sound of splintering wood from somewhere below decks.

"Captain!" Will Turner's voice cut through the chaos as he and Elizabeth approached, both wearing expressions of grim determination. "What can we do to help?"

Jack's mind raced through the tactical possibilities. Will was competent with a sword but had never faced opponents who couldn't be killed. Elizabeth was brave but untrained in combat. However, they both represented potential diplomatic assets in their current alliance with the Royal Navy.

"Miss Swann," Jack said, inspiration striking, "you're going to be our emissary to Commodore Norrington. Mr. Turner will serve as your bodyguard. We need to ensure the Navy remains... cooperative... during this little maritime disagreement."

Elizabeth nodded immediately. "That's easy enough. James will listen to me."

"Excellent," Jack replied, though he couldn't resist adding, "Though perhaps don't mention that I have no intention of surrendering to naval custody once we've dealt with our mutual pirate problem."

Elizabeth's expression shifted to one of mild exasperation. "Jack, I doubt Norrington will accept an alliance with those terms."

"Which is precisely why you shouldn't mention them!" Jack explained with exaggerated patience. "Diplomacy, my dear Miss Swann, is the art of saying one thing while meaning another. In this case, we mean to survive the next hour and worry about the subsequent imprisonment later."

The logic was flawless, even if the ethics were somewhat flexible. But then, flexible ethics had always been one of Jack's most useful skills.

The Pearl was close enough now that Jack could make out individual figures on her deck - the grotesque forms of Barbossa's cursed crew preparing for battle with the mechanical efficiency of the undead. They moved without the hesitation or self-preservation instincts of living men, which would make them formidable opponents even for supernatural allies.

At least we know their weakness, Jack thought, remembering the ritual chamber and the chest of cursed gold. *The question is whether we can exploit it before they overwhelm us through sheer numbers.*

"Go," he told Will and Elizabeth, gesturing toward the HMS Excalibur. "Keep our naval friends happy and well-informed. But do try to avoid mentioning any... inconvenient details about our respective legal statuses."

As they moved toward the rail to signal the other ship, Jack allowed himself a moment of grim satisfaction. It wasn't the most elegant solution to their predicament, but it was workable. Alliance with the Navy, supernatural assistance from both Uzumaki and Captain Pendragon, and the element of surprise regarding the curse's true nature.

Just might work, he decided, watching as the first of the Pearl's escort vessels came within cannon range. *Assuming, of course, that everyone survives what's about to happen.*

The Black Pearl's guns thundered again, this time joined by her escort ships in a coordinated broadside that lit up the afternoon sky with smoke and flame. Jack spun the wheel hard, feeling

the Interceptor respond with the eager grace that had made her such a pleasure to steal in the first place.

Time to see if this impossible alliance can actually work, he thought, preparing to give the order that would commit them all to battle.

At least it won't be boring.

AROUND THE SAME TIME...

The world had become a maelstrom of smoke, shouting, and cannon fire, but all Will Turner could focus on was the warmth of Elizabeth's hand as she pulled him across the Interceptor's chaotic deck. Her fingers were small and delicate compared to his own calloused blacksmith's hands, yet her grip was surprisingly firm as she navigated through the scrambling sailors with determined purpose.

She's holding my hand, the thought repeated in his mind with stunning clarity despite the battle raging around them. *Elizabeth Swann is holding my hand.*

It was ridiculous to be focusing on such things when cursed pirates were bearing down on them from multiple directions, when supernatural beings were preparing for combat just yards away, when death seemed increasingly likely with each passing moment. But Will found himself memorizing every detail - the way her hair had come loose from its proper arrangement during their escape from the caves, how her torn dress fluttered in the wind created by their desperate flight, the look of fierce concentration on her face as she led him toward their destination.

If we're going to die here, he thought with startling clarity, *at least I'll die knowing what it feels like to have her choose me, even if it's just for this moment.*

But even as the romantic part of his mind catalogued these precious details, the practical part - the part trained by years of working with dangerous tools and hot metal - was screaming at him to focus on their immediate survival. Jack had given him a mission: protect Elizabeth and

ensure the Navy remained cooperative. That meant keeping her safe, not indulging in fantasies about a future that might not exist beyond the next few minutes.

He shook his head sharply, trying to clear away the distracting thoughts. Elizabeth had risked everything by refusing Norrington's proposal, by choosing to stay aboard a pirate ship rather than accept the safety of naval protection. The least he could do was prove worthy of that trust.

"Elizabeth," he said, gently taking control of their direction while maintaining his grip on her hand. "Let me lead. We need to move quickly, and I can better watch for - "

A cannonball screamed overhead, close enough that they both felt the wind of its passage. Elizabeth ducked instinctively, pulling closer to Will's protective stance.

" - for things like that," he finished grimly, scanning the deck for the safest route to the HMS Excalibur's position.

"You're right," Elizabeth agreed, though she didn't release his hand. "Lead the way. But Will - be careful. I couldn't bear it if you were hurt because of me."

The concern in her voice sent another surge of warmth through his chest, but he forced himself to focus on navigation rather than interpretation. *She's worried about a friend*, he told himself firmly. *Don't read more into it than that.*

They moved across the deck in a series of quick dashes, timing their movements to avoid both the Interceptor's crew and the incoming fire from the Black Pearl. The HMS Excalibur loomed alongside them now, her crew providing covering fire while maintaining the delicate positioning that kept both ships from colliding in the choppy seas.

"There," Will pointed toward a section of the Excalibur's rail where naval officers were gesturing for them to approach. "Norrington's waiting."

Elizabeth nodded, but as they moved closer, she suddenly stumbled on a loose rope. Will caught her automatically, his arm going around her waist to steady her against his chest. For a moment, they were pressed together in the chaos of battle, her brown eyes looking up into his with startling intensity.

"Thank you," she whispered, and Will felt his heart hammer against his ribs.

"Always," he replied without thinking, then immediately felt heat creep up his neck at the intimate implication of the word.

Elizabeth's cheeks colored slightly, but before either of them could address the moment, another cannon blast reminded them of their urgent mission.

"The ship!" Elizabeth pointed toward the gap between vessels. "We need to jump!"

Will gauged the distance with a blacksmith's eye for precision. "On my count. One... two..."

The Pearl's guns thundered again, this shot aimed directly at the space between the two allied ships. Will saw the trajectory and reacted instinctively, wrapping his arm around Elizabeth's waist and leaping toward the Excalibur's deck just as the cannonball struck the water where they'd been standing moments before.

They landed hard on the naval vessel's planking, Will taking the brunt of the impact while trying to shield Elizabeth from the fall. Naval officers immediately surrounded them, some offering assistance while others kept their weapons ready in case this was some kind of pirate trick.

"Elizabeth!" Commodore Norrington's voice cut through the surrounding chaos, relief evident in his tone. "Thank God you're safe."

Will helped Elizabeth to her feet, noting how Norrington's attention focused entirely on her while barely acknowledging his own presence. *Not that I expected otherwise*, he thought with familiar resignation.

"James," Elizabeth said, stepping slightly away from Will's supportive hand, "Jack Sparrow has a message for you."

Norrington's expression shifted from relief to suspicion. "Jack Sparrow. Of course. What does that pirate want now?"

"An alliance," Elizabeth said without preamble. "At least temporarily, to deal with the Black Pearl and her escort ships. He says we're stronger working together than dying separately."

Will watched Norrington's face carefully, noting the way the commodore's military training warred with his obvious distaste for cooperating with pirates. The man was competent enough to recognize tactical necessity when he saw it, but his sense of duty made the decision clearly distasteful.

"An alliance," Norrington repeated thoughtfully. "With pirates. To fight... other pirates." He paused, studying the approaching Black Pearl with professional assessment. "I suppose Sparrow's crew could serve as cannon fodder while we coordinate the real defense."

"Cannon fodder?" Will stepped forward, his temper flaring despite the precarious nature of their situation. "Those are good men risking their lives to - "

"To save their own skins," Norrington finished coolly. "Just as we're saving ours. Don't mistake necessity for nobility, Mr. Turner."

Elizabeth placed a restraining hand on Will's arm before he could respond. "James, do you accept the alliance or not?"

Norrington considered for another moment, his gaze shifting between the approaching Pearl and the Interceptor's busy deck. "Very well. Tell Sparrow we'll coordinate our defense. But this changes nothing regarding his eventual arrest."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said, already turning to leave with Will close behind.

But their path was suddenly blocked by a formation of marines, their muskets not quite pointed at Will and Elizabeth but ready to be raised at a moment's notice.

"However," Norrington continued, his tone taking on a harder edge, "I'm not letting you return to that pirate ship, Elizabeth. You're under my protection now, as befits your station and our... understanding."

"You cannot hold me!" Elizabeth's voice carried the authority of someone accustomed to getting her way. "I'm not your prisoner, James!"

"You're my responsibility," Norrington replied firmly. "Your father charged me with your safety, and I intend to fulfill that obligation." His gaze shifted to Will with calculating coldness. "Mr. Turner can certainly carry our acceptance back to Sparrow. I'm sure a... blacksmith... is quite capable of delivering a simple message."

Will felt his jaw clench at the dismissive tone, but before he could voice his objections, the HMS Excalibur shuddered violently as one of the Pearl's escort vessels struck her hull amidships.

"Go!" Norrington commanded, his attention immediately shifting to the tactical situation. "Tell Sparrow we accept his alliance. I'll ensure Elizabeth's safety."

Will looked desperately at Elizabeth, wanting to argue, wanting to insist that her protection was his responsibility, not Norrington's. But the sounds of combat were intensifying around them, and delay could cost lives.

"I'll come back for you," he promised quietly, the words carrying more weight than a simple reassurance about their current situation.

Elizabeth's eyes widened slightly at the intensity in his voice, but before she could respond, Will was already moving toward the ship's side, preparing for the dangerous jump back to the Interceptor.

The gap between ships had widened during their brief negotiation, and the water below was now churned white by the impact of cannon fire. Will gauged the distance, gathered himself, and leaped -

- only to land on the Interceptor's deck in the middle of a full-scale battle.

Cursed pirates had somehow boarded during his absence, their skeletal forms locked in combat with the Interceptor's crew. Steel rang against steel, but Will could see that conventional weapons were having little effect against opponents who felt no pain and feared no death.

This is what Jack warned us about, he realized, drawing his sword as a barnacle-encrusted pirate turned toward him with predatory interest. *The cursed can't be killed by normal means.*

The pirate lunged forward with inhuman speed, cutlass aimed at Will's heart. Will parried desperately, his blacksmith's strength barely sufficient to turn aside a blow that should have shattered his blade entirely.

Around him, the battle raged with supernatural intensity. Jack's voice could be heard somewhere in the chaos, shouting orders and what sounded like creative insults. The

bone-wielding Fox Collector was engaged with multiple opponents simultaneously, his strange abilities creating a shifting maze of white spikes and barriers.

And somewhere in the midst of it all, Captain Pendragon moved with deadly grace, her invisible sword cutting through cursed flesh with an effectiveness that conventional weapons couldn't match.

Will parried another strike from his skeletal opponent, already planning his next move while part of his mind remained focused on Elizabeth's safety aboard the Excalibur. The alliance was in place, the supernatural allies were engaged, and the real battle was just beginning.

Hold on, Elizabeth, he thought, settling into the familiar rhythm of combat. *I'll find a way back to you.*

But first, he had to survive the next few minutes against an enemy that couldn't die.

AROUND THE SAME TIME...

The clash of steel against bone filled the air as Artoria moved through the chaotic melee aboard the Interceptor, her invisible blade carving precise arcs through the cursed flesh of Barbossa's crew. Each strike was calculated, efficient, delivered with the mechanical precision of someone who had spent years perfecting the art of warfare.

This is not how naval combat is supposed to proceed, she thought grimly, ducking beneath a cutlass swing while simultaneously driving Excalibur through her attacker's ribcage. In proper naval engagement, there were formations, coordinated broadsides, structured boarding actions conducted according to established tactical principles.

This was chaos. Pure, undiluted chaos.

Her training in the Royal Navy had prepared her for duels - civilized affairs conducted according to rules of engagement, with seconds and formal protocols. Even the supernatural threats she'd been assigned to handle typically involved single opponents or small groups that could be dealt with through superior skill and strategy.

But this? Eight, ten, sometimes a dozen cursed pirates converging on her position simultaneously, their undead nature making them fearless and relentless in ways that living opponents never could be? This was something else entirely.

If I were an ordinary human, she reflected, parrying a thrust from a pirate whose jaw hung at an unnatural angle, I would already be overwhelmed.

But Artoria Pendragon was far from ordinary, and as the battle intensified around her, muscle memory older than her current existence began to assert itself. The deck of the Interceptor faded, replaced by the training yards of Camelot where she had learned to fight not as a naval officer, but as a knight preparing for war.

Her footwork shifted subtly, adapting to patterns she had mastered in another life, another world. Each advance and retreat carried the weight of countless hours spent drilling with the Knights of the Round Table, preparing for battles where the stakes were not mere victory or defeat, but the survival of a kingdom.

These numbers are nothing, she realized, settling into the familiar rhythm of large-scale combat. In Camelot, I faced Saxon war parties twice this size. The dead might not feel pain, but they still follow predictable attack patterns.

Excalibur sang through the air with renewed purpose, each strike now part of a larger tactical framework that turned individual duels into a flowing dance of controlled violence. Her invisible blade found gaps in armor, weak points in bone structure, angles of attack that her opponents couldn't anticipate or defend against effectively.

The cursed pirates began to fall back before her advance, though they continued to press forward with the mindless determination of the undead. Artoria found herself falling into old

patterns, strategies developed for fighting enemies who outnumbered her forces but lacked the coordination and tactical flexibility of living opponents.

This is almost nostalgic, she thought, spinning away from a coordinated attack by three skeletal figures while her blade traced a defensive pattern that left all three damaged beyond immediate effectiveness.

But nostalgia proved to be a dangerous indulgence in the middle of a supernatural battle. As her mind drifted to memories of Camelot and the knights who had fought beside her, her attention wavered just long enough for the cursed pirates to adapt to her tactics.

They stopped trying to engage her in individual combat and instead began swarming her position, using their numerical advantage to overwhelm her defensive capabilities through sheer volume of attacks. Where before she had faced three or four opponents at once, now she found herself surrounded by eight figures pressing in from all sides.

This is problematic, she admitted, parrying desperately as cutlasses and boarding axes converged on her from multiple angles. Her superior skill was being neutralized by the simple expedient of too many attacks coming too quickly for even supernatural reflexes to handle.

A blade sliced across her shoulder, another struck her thigh, and suddenly Artoria found herself being pushed back toward the ship's rail with nowhere to retreat. The cursed pirates sensed their advantage and pressed forward with renewed aggression, their skeletal faces twisted into expressions of predatory satisfaction.

For a moment, Artoria considered her options. She could continue fighting conventionally, but the mathematics of the situation were clear - eventually, the sheer number of attacks would overwhelm her defenses. She could attempt to break out of the encirclement, but that would mean turning her back on multiple opponents, an almost certainly fatal mistake.

Or she could use *it*.

The thought made her hesitate even as steel whistled past her ear. Excalibur's true power was not something to be revealed lightly, especially not in the presence of so many witnesses. The weapon's capabilities went far beyond simple invisibility, but using them would expose her nature in ways that could complicate her mission significantly.

But as the cursed pirates closed in for what appeared to be a killing blow, Artoria made her decision. Better to reveal her true nature than to fail in her duty entirely.

Excalibur began to glow.

Not the invisible distortion that normally marked its presence, but a brilliant golden radiance that made the air itself seem to shimmer with divine power. The cursed pirates hesitated, their undead instincts recognizing the presence of something that could truly harm them.

But before Artoria could unleash the attack that would have cleared the deck around her, something unexpected happened.

The Fox Collector appeared between her and her attackers like a white-bone barrier come to life. Massive spikes erupted from his back and shoulders, creating a protective wall that intercepted the cursed pirates' coordinated assault. His transformation was more dramatic than anything she had witnessed during their duel, bone formations spreading across his body in patterns that spoke of both desperate improvisation and underlying tactical intelligence.

The cursed pirates' weapons struck his bone armor with sounds like hammers against stone, but the Fox Collector held firm, his unusual abilities proving remarkably effective against opponents who relied primarily on conventional weapons.

"Why?" Artoria asked, allowing Excalibur's glow to fade as the immediate threat was neutralized. "Why did you save me?"

"Now we're even," Naruto replied, his voice strained from the effort of maintaining his bone defenses. "You helped us escape the caves, I helped you escape being skewered. No debts between us."

Despite their dire circumstances, Artoria almost chuckled at the irony. "The Fox Collector doesn't wish to collect debts?"

Before Naruto could respond, more cursed pirates began converging on their position, drawn by the commotion and the obvious threat represented by their combined abilities. Artoria positioned herself back-to-back with the young man, Excalibur once again invisible but ready.

"We might be here for a while," she observed, counting at least a dozen new opponents approaching from various directions.

"Perfect," Naruto replied with what sounded like genuine cheerfulness despite their situation. "Gives you time to study my fighting style so you can capture me more easily later."

"Nonsense," Artoria replied automatically, settling into a combat stance that felt natural despite their unconventional alliance. "I could capture you regardless of how well I understand your abilities."

It was professional confidence born of years of successfully completing impossible missions, but as she felt the Fox Collector's bone armor shift and adapt behind her, Artoria found herself wondering if that confidence was entirely justified.

The cursed pirates charged their position in a coordinated wave, and all such philosophical considerations were swept away by the immediate demands of survival.

AROUND THE SAME TIME...

The bone spikes retracted into Naruto's flesh with a sensation that never quite stopped being unsettling - like pieces of his soul being drawn back into his body, leaving phantom aches where they had emerged. He'd grown accustomed to the feeling over his years with Jones, but it still reminded him that his abilities came at a cost, drawing from reserves that weren't infinite.

"You're pushing too hard," the Fox warned, its voice carrying a note of genuine concern that Naruto had learned to recognize as dangerous. *"You've been using your abilities almost continuously since escaping the caves. Your chakra reserves are lower than you think."*

Don't have much choice, Naruto thought back, watching as more cursed pirates emerged from the smoke and chaos around them. *If I stop now, we're all dead.*

"Better to retreat and regroup than exhaust yourself completely," the Fox replied with characteristic pragmatism. *"What good will you be to Jones if you're too drained to collect his debt?"*

Tell that to them, Naruto gestured toward the approaching enemies, bone blades already beginning to form along his forearms despite the Fox's warnings.

The Fox's exasperated sigh echoed in his mind, but it didn't argue further. There were times for tactical withdrawal and times for standing your ground, and they both knew which category their current situation fell into.

The cursed pirates moved with the relentless coordination of creatures who had no concept of fatigue or self-preservation. They came in waves, each group testing different approaches to overcome his bone defenses, learning from their predecessors' failures with an intelligence that seemed at odds with their undead nature.

Naruto adapted as best he could, his fighting style as erratic and improvisational as ever. When they tried to overwhelm him with numbers, he created barrier formations. When they attempted to outflank him, he shifted to mobile attacks, bone projectiles launching from unexpected angles. When they pressed close with coordinated strikes, he phased partially through their weapons while his solid bone strikes found gaps in their defenses.

But adaptation had its limits, and Naruto could feel his control beginning to slip. The bone formations took longer to manifest, their shapes less precise than he intended. His phasing abilities flickered inconsistently, leaving him solid at inconvenient moments. Most troubling of all, the Fox's energy felt increasingly distant, as if his partner was conserving strength for some greater crisis yet to come.

This isn't working, he realized as a cutlass sliced across his ribs, drawing blood despite his attempted dodge. *They're wearing me down by degrees.*

Through the chaos of combat, he caught sight of Captain Pendragon surrounded by her own group of attackers. Despite her obvious skill, she was being pressed back toward the ship's rail, outnumbered and running out of maneuvering room.

She helped us escape the caves, Naruto thought, making a decision that he knew the Fox would disapprove of. *Time to return the favor.*

"*You can barely handle your own opponents*," the Fox observed dryly as Naruto began fighting his way toward Artoria's position. "*But you can't help yourself, can you?*"

Nope, Naruto admitted cheerfully, launching himself across the chaotic deck with bone spikes erupting from his back to clear a path through the intervening pirates.

The maneuver cost him more energy than he could afford, but it got him to Artoria's side just as her attackers were preparing what looked like a coordinated killing blow. His bone armor manifested just in time to intercept their assault, white formations spreading across his body in patterns that were equal parts desperate improvisation and tactical necessity.

"Why?" she asked, and he could hear genuine puzzlement in her voice despite the sounds of battle surrounding them.

"Now we're even," he replied, though maintaining his defensive formation was taking more concentration than he'd expected. "No debts between us."

More cursed pirates were converging on their position now, drawn by the obvious threat they represented together. Naruto found himself back-to-back with Captain Pendragon, their combined presence apparently enough to warrant the attention of what looked like half of Barbossa's boarding party.

"We might be here for a while," Artoria observed with remarkable calm.

"Perfect," Naruto replied, trying to project confidence he didn't entirely feel. "Gives you time to study my fighting style so you can capture me more easily later."

"Nonsense. I could capture you regardless of how well I understand your abilities."

Under different circumstances, Naruto might have been offended by her casual dismissal of his capabilities. Instead, he found himself almost amused by her professional confidence, even as more enemies approached from all directions.

At least she's honest about her intentions, he thought, bone weapons extending from both arms as he prepared for the next wave of attacks.

The cursed pirates came at them from every angle - some climbing down from the rigging, others emerging from below decks, still more swinging across from the Black Pearl itself on ropes and chains. It was a coordinated assault designed to overwhelm through sheer numbers and persistent pressure.

Naruto's bone formations shifted constantly, adapting to each new threat as it emerged. Defensive spikes to block incoming attacks, projectile launchers to clear space around their position, mobility enhancements to help him dodge the increasingly desperate strikes of his

opponents. His fighting style was pure improvisation, but it was improvisation backed by years of supernatural training and the Fox's increasingly concerned energy.

But even improvisation had its limits, and Naruto could feel his abilities beginning to fail under the sustained pressure. His bone weapons were becoming less stable, his phasing abilities more erratic, his overall coordination suffering from simple exhaustion.

This is it, he realized as the cursed pirates pressed closer, their skeletal faces twisted into expressions of anticipatory triumph. *I'm going to run out of energy before they run out of bodies.*

That was when he saw something that changed everything - Captain Pendragon, overwhelmed by her own group of attackers, being pushed back toward what looked like certain defeat. Her invisible sword was moving with desperate speed, but there were simply too many opponents for even her supernatural skill to handle.

Without conscious thought, Naruto made a decision that would have horrified the Fox if there had been time to consult it.

"Hold onto something!" he shouted to Artoria, his voice carrying an urgency that cut through the chaos around them.

"Why?" she called back, even as her invisible blade carved through another attacker.

"I don't know," Naruto admitted, feeling something deep within him beginning to stir - something that felt different from the Fox's chakra, different from his bone abilities, different from anything he'd ever experienced. "Just trust me!"

And somehow, impossibly, she did. Captain Artoria Pendragon, the Crown's Saber, supernatural naval officer with orders to capture him, wrapped one arm around the nearest piece of rigging and braced herself for whatever was about to happen.

Naruto closed his eyes and reached inward, past the Fox's energy, past his bone manipulation abilities, into something deeper. Something that felt like it belonged to him and him alone. It was raw, primal, untrained - like finding a new limb he'd never known he possessed.

Energy began to gather in his palm, formless at first but gradually taking shape. It wasn't the Fox's red chakra or the pale glow of his bone weapons. This was something else entirely - blue-white and crackling with potential, swirling in patterns that seemed to follow no earthly physics.

"What are you doing?" the Fox's voice carried a note of alarm he'd never heard before. *"That's not my power - what is that?"*

I don't know, Naruto thought back, watching in fascination as the energy continued to build. It felt like trying to hold a miniature hurricane in his hand, power that wanted to spiral outward but was being compressed into an increasingly unstable sphere.

The cursed pirates sensed the change in the air and pressed their attack with renewed desperation, but something about the growing energy made them hesitate. Even their undead instincts recognized the presence of something dangerous, something that transcended their normal understanding of threat and survival.

The sphere in Naruto's palm grew denser, brighter, more chaotic. Sparks of energy began to arc between his fingers, and the very air around him started to shimmer with heat distortion. The wooden deck beneath his feet began to smoke where droplets of power touched it.

This is insane, he realized, feeling the energy fighting against his control like a living thing. *I don't know how to contain this, don't know how to direct it -*

But there was no time for doubt. The cursed pirates had overcome their hesitation and were rushing forward in a final coordinated assault, weapons raised, skeletal faces twisted with the determination of creatures who knew no fear.

Naruto made a choice that was equal parts desperation and instinct.

He let go.

The sphere of energy exploded outward from his position like a star being born. This energy whooshed like a spiral, a whirlpool of power that seemed to grab everything in its path and hurl it away with impossible force. The air itself became visible, twisted into spiraling currents that made the very atmosphere scream with the sound of wind moving faster than nature ever intended.

The cursed pirates caught in the blast's path simply vanished - not destroyed, but swept away so violently that they became streaks of motion disappearing into the distance. Those on the periphery were lifted off their feet and sent tumbling across the deck like broken dolls, their undead forms slamming into masts and rigging with bone-shattering impacts.

The blast expanded outward in a perfect circle, its spiraling energy carving a groove into the Interceptor's deck as it passed. When it reached the ship's rail, it kept going, creating a waterspout that stretched up toward the sky like a tornado made of pure force.

For a moment that felt like eternity, the entire world seemed to hold its breath. The energy spiral hung in the air like a monument to impossible power, its blue-white radiance casting everything around it into stark relief. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it dissipated, leaving only the echo of its passing and the acrid smell of ozone.

Naruto collapsed to one knee, his entire body shaking with exhaustion. The technique - whatever it had been - had drained him more thoroughly than anything he'd ever attempted. His vision swam, his hands trembled, and he felt as though he'd just tried to hold back the ocean with his bare hands.

But it had worked.

When the light faded and the echoes of the blast died away, an eerie silence had fallen over the battlefield. Cursed pirates lay scattered in broken heaps across the deck, their forms too damaged to immediately regenerate. Those who remained standing did so only because they'd been far enough away to avoid the technique's full force, and even they appeared stunned by what they'd witnessed.

Living crew members from both ships stared in amazed silence at the destruction that had been wrought by a single desperate technique. Even the sounds of battle from the other vessels had quieted, as if the entire engagement had paused to absorb the implications of what had just occurred.

Naruto swayed on his feet, exhaustion hitting him like a physical blow as the adrenaline of combat began to fade. His breathing came in ragged gasps, and he had to fight to remain upright as his vision swam with fatigue.

Did I really do that? he wondered, looking at the devastation around him with a mixture of pride and bewilderment. The circular groove carved into the deck looked like the mark of some divine weapon, and the scattered remains of his enemies testified to power he hadn't known he possessed.

Even Captain Pendragon was staring at him with her mouth slightly open, her professional composure completely shattered by what she had just witnessed. The expression of shocked amazement on her face was almost worth the exhaustion he was feeling.

"That was... new," the Fox's voice carried a note of something that might have been awe. *"I've never felt anything like that energy. It wasn't mine, it wasn't from Jones' teachings... where did it come from?"*

I don't know, Naruto admitted, still struggling to remain upright. *It just felt... right. Like it was always there, waiting.*

People were impressed, he thought with a tired grin, looking around at the stunned faces surrounding him. *Maybe impressed enough to make me Hokage after all...*

The thought brought a familiar pang of loss, memories of a dream that belonged to another world, another life. The bridge where his teammates had betrayed him, the village that had never truly accepted him, the title he'd wanted more than anything else in existence.

But he pushed the pain away, replacing it with something that felt more appropriate to his current circumstances.

Not Hokage, he corrected himself, watching the sea spray settle back onto the deck around the crater his technique had carved. *Maybe Kage of the Seas.*

"*Stop being nostalgic and look forward*," the Fox's voice cut through his tired contemplation with sharp urgency. "*The source of the silence.*"

Naruto raised his head and felt his blood run cold. The Black Pearl loomed directly ahead of them now, having somehow closed the distance during his spectacular display of power. Worse still, standing on the deck just a few meters away was a figure that commanded attention through sheer presence alone.

Captain Barbossa had come to pay them a visit.

The cursed pirate captain studied Naruto with calculating eyes, his weathered face twisted into what might have been amusement or professional interest. When he spoke, his voice carried the weight of supernatural authority and barely contained menace.

"Well, well," Barbossa said with theatrical courtesy, his gaze moving deliberately across the devastation Naruto's technique had wrought. "If it isn't the Fox Collector himself, gracing us with such a... spectacular demonstration." His eyes returned to Naruto with increased intensity. "Tell

me, lad - what manner of business does Davy Jones have in these waters? Does your captain have designs on territorial expansion?"

Naruto's mind raced, but exhaustion made coherent thought difficult. He was the center of attention now, with the fate of multiple ships and crews potentially hanging on his next words. Captain Pendragon was watching him with unreadable intensity, while the sounds of battle from the other vessels suggested this confrontation was far from over.

"Think carefully," the Fox advised, its mental voice carrying none of its usual sardonic humor. "Your answer here could determine whether we sail away from this encounter or become permanent residents of the ocean floor."

Naruto took a deep breath, trying to project confidence he didn't entirely feel as he prepared to engage in the most important negotiation of his new life.

End.

What a ending! Right!?

I honestly feel bad for ending the chapter at such an interesting point.

But in my defense, I do have to get you guys hooked so you can come back for more.

See you all on the next update!