Yo.

Chapter 16 over here.

Do enjoy.

Start:

NARUTO'S POV

A blade screamed past his ear and bit into the gold-spilled stone behind him.

Naruto rolled with the impact, boots scraping against coins that hissed like dry leaves under his weight, and felt the burn in his lungs travel the long slow mile from warning to outright complaint.

Three more minutes, he thought, ducking under Barbossa's next sweep, *give them three more minutes and we can call this whole stupid evening a win.*

That was the plan, if you could even call it that.

Wait until Will and Elizabeth and Artoria cleared the main mouth of the cavern, then he and Jack would peel off, drop a couple of explosive tags somewhere loud and ill-advised to buy themselves a head start, and they'd all find each other on whatever sliver of beach the tide had been kind enough to leave behind.

Simple. Awful. Theirs.

Jack was off to his left, kicking up a cloud of coin dust and saying something insulting about apples and women and the way Barbossa's beard hadn't aged a single hour in ten years. The man fought like he sang - like the whole point of the song was the audience, never the song.

That was useful. It needed to keep being useful.

"Optimistic," the Fox murmured, low and amused, somewhere behind his ribs. *"For a boy who can count what's left of his chakra on one hand and still has fingers spare."*

I've got enough, Naruto thought back, ducking again as Barbossa's cutlass carved a half-moon through the air where his head had been. *Two explosive tags. Maybe two clones if I'm stingy. A couple of those bone shards I can throw without paying the whole price. Enough to make him flinch when it matters. Enough to support the others until their feet find a deck.*

"And the rest?"

The rest is Norrington.

The Fox didn't laugh. He didn't have to.

He said he'd bring his marines, Naruto thought, lower now, like saying it more quietly would make it more true. *He said he'd come. The whole reason we set the timing this way was so he'd come.*

"Men in coats with brass buttons say a lot of things, kid. Especially the kind of things that sound very fine in the saying and very thin in the keeping."

He'll come.

"Optimistic," the Fox said again, and let the word sit in the dark space behind Naruto's eyes like a coin dropped into deep water.

Naruto bit down hard on the inside of his cheek and tasted iron, copper, the small bright stubborn fact of his own body still working. He slid sideways across the gold as Barbossa pivoted, cutlass already mid-arc. Jack was there in the same heartbeat - half a stumble and half a flourish, sword angled wrong on purpose, voice pitched to wound.

"Tell me, Hector - does it taste like ash yet? That apple? Or only like nothing at all? Surely a man of your refinement remembers the difference."

Barbossa's roar shook dust from the cavern roof.

Good, Naruto thought, *stay loud. Stay loud and stay angry and stay nowhere near looking up.*

He risked a glance - just a glance, just a flick - at the cursed crew ranked along the upper terraces.

They hadn't moved.

Hadn't lifted a blade. Hadn't taken a single carved-stone step toward the heap of treasure or the three cloaked figures threading slow and uneven along the cavern's far wall.

They just stood there, hands hung on the grips of pistols and cutlasses that hadn't sung in a century, eyes hollow under the torchlight, jaws working soundlessly around something that might have been speech once, in another lifetime, on another sea.

Waiting for an order that wasn't coming.

That's it, Naruto thought, almost dizzy with it, *that's the trick of him.*

He'd suspected it on the deck of the Excalibur, when the cursed crew had stood mute through the whole hostage standoff like puppets with the strings gone slack. He'd half-believed it walking into this cave. Now he was sure, sure the way the bone-bloodline had taught him to be sure - bone-deep, a small singing certainty under the noise.

Barbossa's grip on his crew worked like a current. It ran where his attention ran. It thinned where his attention thinned.

The more of his mind that was occupied with the immediate and very personal project of carving Jack Sparrow into thirds, the less of him there was left to push down those carved stone steps and end the whole evening in thirty seconds of skeletal violence.

Distraction was the rope. The whole rope. The only rope they had to climb.

"He cannot watch two boards at once," the Fox observed, and there was something nearly approving in the way he said it. *"Old animal. Old habit. A predator with one prey forgets there is a world."*

Then we make sure he doesn't remember, Naruto thought.

A cutlass came for his throat in a flat horizontal sweep. He stepped inside it, palm slapping Barbossa's forearm out and up, and let a half-formed shadow clone burst into smoke at the man's right shoulder - just enough pressure to make him flinch sideways, just enough motion for Jack to skip back out of killing range with his coat-tails flaring like a courtier's bow.

Barbossa's blade found Jack's coat. Not Jack.

Jack laughed like it was a joke he'd told himself ten years ago and had been saving for company.

"Missed."

Naruto exhaled, ragged, and felt the bone in his right forearm shift restlessly under the skin - a coral-light pressure asking permission to come out and play. He didn't give it. Not yet. Save it. Save it for when one of those steel half-moons was actually going to land instead of nearly land. Save it for the open door, not the closed one.

Few more minutes, he thought again, almost prayer-shaped. *Few more minutes.*

He risked another look at the far wall.

Three shapes, low to the ground, moving in the slow uneven cadence of people trying very hard not to look like people. Artoria's gold-touched silhouette at the front - even under the cloak, the King-shape of her shoulders showed through, the careful unhurried bearing of someone who had once held a country's worth of fate in two hands and now carried three lives in the same grip. Elizabeth's hand on Will's sleeve. Will's white shirt swallowed under the wool, only the bandage on his palm catching a stray licking of torchlight as they slipped past a knot of frozen skeletal pirates that did not so much as turn their heads.

They were nearly to the lip of the outer cave.

Almost, he thought, *almost, almost, just walk.*

"You will both fall over before they reach the boats," the Fox said, flatly now, no amusement left in him at all. *"You and the drunk. Stamina is not a renewable resource, kit. Not for him. And not, today, for you."*

I know.

"Then?"

Then we hold until we can't. And when we can't, we run, and we hope Norrington's marines are doing what he said they would be doing.

A pause. The kind of pause that, in another voice, in another life, might have been a sigh.

"Optimistic."

No choice, Naruto thought back, and meant it harder than he'd meant anything since the bridge. *There has to be a way out of this. There has to be. We don't get to be the ones who fall down here. Not after coming this far. Not after dragging them this far.*

The Fox said nothing to that. The Fox was old enough to know when nothing was the right answer.

Barbossa's foot ground down on a spill of coins as he turned, breath sawing now, jaw working under the beard - not from the weight of the cutlass, Naruto guessed, but from the long shape of rage trying and trying to find purchase on a target that kept slipping. The kind of tired that came before mistakes. The kind of tired that, in any other fight, in any other life, would have been an opening.

Naruto couldn't take the opening. The opening wasn't his to take. The opening was for Will and Elizabeth and Artoria, three slow shapes at the cavern's edge, breath held under cloaks, and he was the wedge keeping the door pried open while they walked through.

Jack saw it too. Jack always saw it. The grin he flashed Naruto over Barbossa's shoulder was the same grin he wore on the deck of a sinking ship - half please-don't-die-yet, half wouldn't-this-make-a-song. He gave Naruto a tiny dip of the chin. He could keep going. For now.

Hold on, Jack, Naruto thought. *Just a little longer. Just until the others clear the mouth. Then we run and you'll hate every second of it and we'll be alive to argue about it.*

Barbossa raised his cutlass for another descending strike, and Naruto bent his knees and felt the rasp of coins beneath his soles.

JACK'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

Now there was a turn of events.

The boy was alive.

The boy with the cut palm and the inheritance problem and the entirely too-loud apprenticeship in blacksmithing was alive, walking on his own two legs along the far wall of the cavern under a cloak that was approximately the right amount of dramatic, and the man on the cliff with the borrowed sword and the borrowed evening had jumped a clone.

A clone. Honestly.

Jack Sparrow nearly laughed, which would have been catastrophic, so he turned the laugh into a step and the step into a near-miss and the near-miss into a comment about Barbossa's mother.

"Surely she'd be ashamed, Hector. Truly."

Barbossa snarled and pivoted and tried to kill him again.

That was - well. That was the difficulty, wasn't it?

Because if Will is alive, Jack thought, with the careful clarity he reserved for situations involving sharp objects and his own continued ambition, *and Will is alive because that delightfully alarming young person has apparently mastered the art of producing a corpse on demand - well then. Well then. Then the curse hasn't broken.*

And if the curse hasn't broken.

He felt for it, quietly, the way a man might feel for a coin in a pocket he hadn't quite trusted yet. There it was. The faint, awful, useful little hum under his sternum that had not been there a fortnight ago. Still there. Still humming. Still his, for the moment.

Still cursed, Jack thought, with something that wasn't joy, exactly, but had family resemblance to it.

He stepped left. Barbossa's cutlass went through where his shoulder had been. He smiled, briefly and privately, at the empty air it had cut.

Now there was a thing one did not say. Not to Naruto, who would absolutely make a face about it. Not to Barbossa, who would adjust his murder strategy accordingly. Not to himself, even, except in the small private cathedral where Jack Sparrow lived alone with his decisions and his rum.

Not yet, he thought. *Not yet.*

Naruto wanted a diversion, and a diversion he would have, because Naruto had bought him the most valuable currency in the known seas - a handful of unsupervised minutes to think.

Jack was very good with five minutes.

Most men were good with armies. Or with cannons. Or with wives. Jack Sparrow had built an entire career on what could be accomplished in five unsupervised minutes with a cork, a knife, and a sufficiently distracted captor.

He flourished his sword in a manner that was almost certainly insulting and definitely showy. "Hector! Hector, my old friend, listen - you've been so very fixated on the boy, surely your manners haven't *entirely* escaped along with your soul - "

"Shut your mouth, Sparrow."

" - but I do seem to recall, once upon a tide, you owed me a drink - "

Barbossa's blade hit a stalactite where Jack's neck had been. Jack made an appreciative sort of face at the chip of stone that fell at his boot.

Revenge, he thought.

It was an old word for him. An old shape, smoothed by the inside of his coat pocket where he'd been carrying it for ten years. He had used to be very honest with himself about it. He had used to lie down at night in any one of seven harbours and turn the word over until the edges of it caught light.

He wanted his ship back.

He wanted the Black Pearl back the way a drowning man wants his name. He wanted her sails, and her wheel, and her keel against southerly water, and the long oily lamplit hold where a man

could think for three days running without anyone interrupting. He wanted the planks he'd known by feel. He wanted Hector Barbossa not to have her.

He wanted Hector Barbossa not to have anything.

That last want, that was the fantasy. It had always been the fantasy. A man who could not be killed could not be killed *back*, and so the wanting had sat in Jack's coat for ten years getting nothing - a child's wish carried by a grown smuggler with bad teeth and worse luck.

Until tonight.

Until, Jack thought, ducking a blade he'd seen coming three sentences ago, *the curse failed to break.*

Until the curse failed to break and Hector didn't notice.

Now that was the article.

Because Barbossa thought the curse was lifting, or thought it was lifted, or thought something very slightly the wrong colour of true. There was a wrinkle in the thing - a fold Hector had been pressing flat with the weight of his certainty for ten years, and Hector did not know about the fold, and Jack did. Jack had always known. Jack had picked up that fold the way other men picked pockets, quietly and without comment, and had carried it next to his coin and his second-best knife.

How to use it.

That was the unattractive part. He didn't know yet. He had perhaps four minutes and an entire cave full of inconveniently-static skeletons and one extremely tired blonde child between him and an idea, and the idea hadn't arrived.

So he did what he did when ideas were late.

He irritated.

"Tell me, Hector, do you remember the moon? Real moonlight. The kind that fell on real skin, on a real face. The kind a man could fall asleep under without his bones showing through. You remember that, don't you?"

Barbossa screamed something that might have been a name and might have been a curse and brought the cutlass down in a chop that would have parted Jack's collarbone from his pleasant memories of it.

Jack sidestepped, theatrically. Then he sidestepped again, even more theatrically.

He saw Naruto out of the corner of one eye - the boy was favouring his right leg now, the bone-trick under the skin twitching like it wanted out and was being told no - and Jack felt, against his very explicit better judgement, a small pang of something inconvenient.

Pity, he diagnosed, internally. *No - no, similar shape, wrong key.*

Affection, he tried, and then made a face at himself for it.

The truth was - and Jack didn't enjoy truth, generally, finding it inferior to most fictions - the truth was that the boy was too kind for this. Too kind for piracy. Too kind for whatever apparently complicated maritime debt-collection arrangement he'd fallen into with the sea-thing on the

black ship. The boy had skills, yes, of a kind Jack had never seen and would very much like to play cards against later, but he was *green*. Pearl-green. New-leaf-green. The kind of green that, in the kind of world Jack lived in, did not last a season unsupervised.

He had a lot to learn. About piracy. About people. About the precise calibrated angle at which one offered help and at which, very swiftly, one withdrew it.

Jack would, regrettably, end up teaching him. He could feel that already. He could feel that the way other men felt rain coming.

"Sparrow!" Barbossa was, if anything, louder now. His face had gone the colour of an angry copper kettle in firelight. "Stop your prancing! And you - boy - stop your *avoiding*! You stand and you take it! You and this drunken sea-louse will die here, in this cave, on this gold, by my hand, with my crew stood witness to every last twitch of it! That's the bargain! That's the end of it! My crew. Will. Watch!"

Yes, yes, Jack thought, *we hear you, Hector. The whole island hears you. Kindly continue not noticing the door.*

He flicked a glance at the cave mouth.

Will's bandaged hand on Elizabeth's shoulder. Artoria's gold-touched silhouette turning the slow corner of the outer cavern. They were nearly there. Nearly nearly.

Four minutes, Jack thought. *Three. Two and a half, if I do this properly. Two and a half and then I find out what kind of idea arrives on a deadline.*

He set his feet, lifted his sword, and prepared to be insufferable.

ARTORIA'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

The tunnel narrowed.

The cave-vault behind them - gold-lit, sword-loud, Naruto's evasion sliding around the edges of Barbossa's fury like a coin spun across a tabletop - fell away one careful step at a time. Captain Artoria Pendragon of His Majesty's Royal Navy let her grip on Will Turner's shoulder beneath the cloak say what her voice could not.

Steady. Walk. Breathe through the cloth. Eyes on the floor.

Will obeyed. Will, to his credit, was excellent at obeying right now. He was bleeding into the wool of her naval cloak from a cut he had not himself asked for, on a palm Naruto had opened earlier with apologies and a sharpened knife, and was conducting himself with the kind of stiff careful courage that, in another life - a life with longer roads and louder oaths and a different colour of sky - she would have considered knighting him for.

She did not knight men, in this life. She commanded them.

Elizabeth Swann walked on Will's other side, hand pressed to the small of his back inside the fold of the cloak, the contact half guidance and half reassurance and half - Artoria suspected - a private claim Elizabeth had not yet entirely admitted to herself. The girl's eyes were on the path. The girl's mouth was a hard pale line.

Good.

Behind them and slightly ahead, in the shifting torch-shadows, two of her own crew moved. Sailors she had personally drilled, in three different harbours, on three different watches. They knew her cadence. They knew her silences. The leading flank held a blunderbuss low and ready, the long-stride economy of his gait the same one she had shaped over a year of drilling.

The rear held a cutlass drawn, weight on the balls of his feet, eyes flicking right left right at the alcoves where the cave's torchlight gave out and the dark started.

Her hands had shaped them. She knew the precise length of stride each of them preferred. She knew the way each of them held his breath before a shot.

She was glad of them. She also did not, in any way at all, intend to let them die for this.

The tunnel made another turning.

The undead were in the alcoves.

They stood, where the torchlight reached them, in the precise frozen attitudes Barbossa had left them in. Half-decayed faces. Eye sockets where slow points of moonlight should not have been - but here, on this cursed island, were. A pirate near the left wall had one barnacled hand raised as if to scratch his cheek, and had not lowered it. Another sat slumped against a cracked rib of stone, jawbone caught in a smile that had nothing left to smile about.

None of them moved.

None of them turned their heads.

Dazed, Artoria thought, and the word was not the right one but it was the one her sailor-mind reached for first. *Their commander is not commanding. They wait. We pass.*

She watched the nearest pirate's eye-socket as she walked Will past it. She watched it for any flicker, any tightening, any small terrible turn in her direction. Nothing. The thing's mouth hung open. The thing breathed in a way that was not, technically, breathing.

Walk past. Do not flinch. He cannot see you while his master cannot.

She did not flinch.

Will, beside her, did. Slightly. His shoulder twitched under the cloak as they passed close enough to brush the skeletal arm hung up in the air. She tightened her hand on him fractionally - a captain's pressure, the same one she would put on a young midshipman's collar during his first broadside.

I have you. Move.

He moved.

She could see the cave mouth ahead now. A pale grey wedge of outdoor air in the tunnel's distant shape - sea-mist and torchlight bleeding into one another, perhaps two hundred yards of careful walking away. Three minutes if they kept this pace. Perhaps four.

And between them and the open air - more undead. She could see them at the edge of the wedge. A loose cordon. Eight, ten, fourteen. She kept counting and made herself stop counting at fourteen because counting past fourteen was a habit she had been trying to break since the moor where the king's road had ended and the lake had taken her.

She did not think about the lake.

She was Captain Artoria Pendragon of His Majesty's Royal Navy. The lake was another woman's memory. The sword at her hip in this present-tense Caribbean evening was, technically, the same sword - Shirou Emiya's wish had not been generous enough or perhaps had been too generous and had given her her old companion in this new geography - but the hands that held it now had learned to load a flintlock and steer a frigate and count men by name and trust the count.

Those hands were not afraid.

Not as afraid as they ought to have been, perhaps. There was a small still pool of fear at the bottom of her, the pool that all officers carry and most of them lie about, but the surface of it was not moving.

Her crew was outside. The Excalibur sat in the lee of the island, sails reefed, gun-ports cracked just enough to be ready. Her sharpest were on her decks. If the worst happened - if the cordon ahead woke before her party cleared its line of sight, if Barbossa's grip on his crew snapped back the way a stretched cable snaps and they all turned in unison and remembered what they were - then her marines would already be moving up the beach in disciplined firing-lines, and they would hold the mouth long enough for her to get Will Turner clear.

Long enough. That was the operative phrase.

Whether they could hold *more* than that - against an enemy whose chests would simply stitch themselves back together every time a musketball found a heart - that was the operative she did not let herself dwell on.

Cruel, she thought, glancing at the silhouette of the man on her flank, the man whose breathing she could pick out of a parade ground at a hundred paces, *to ask men I have personally trained to fight a thing they cannot kill.*

It would be cruel. She knew it the way she knew the weight of her own coat. These were the men she would, if the cordon woke, ask to stand in a firing line against the unkillable for as long as it took her to get the bleeding boy under her cloak past their line of sight. They would do it. They would do it because she asked. They would do it well.

It might also be necessary.

Unless.

Unless, her mind murmured, in that careful officer's voice she used for the worst of her tactical calculations, *I drew it.*

She did not look down at the sword at her hip. She did not have to. She knew its weight to the gram.

Drawing it - not as a captain's sabre but as the thing it actually was, the thing whose true name she had said aloud, in this present-tense world, exactly twice and meant exactly once - would clear this cave in something less than a heartbeat. The cordon at the mouth. The dazed pirates in the alcoves. Even, possibly, the cliff-fight she had walked away from. All of it could be ended by a single drawn breath and the unsheathing of a thing that had not been unsheathed under that name since the Grail had taken her.

It would also, in the same heartbeat, tell every supernatural ear in this cursed sea that something had arrived in the Caribbean which had no business being in any present-tense century at all.

Davy Jones would hear it.

Davy Jones, who had picked Naruto out of the world's seam between Lands of Waves and oceans, would hear it most clearly of all. And the moment Davy Jones heard it, Naruto - who walked under that great cursed shadow whether he understood the shape of it or not - would have a target placed on her in his patron's voice. Other powers in this cursed sea would hear it too. Powers she had not yet met and would prefer to meet on her own schedule, in her own time, at the angle of her own choosing.

The cost of the draw was a future she would no longer be running.

She could not pay that price. Not yet. Not here, in a tunnel under an island, for two minutes of walking and one bleeding boy and a cordon she might still slip past.

The ace would stay in the hand. The hand would stay closed.

She walked.

Will breathed shallow into the cloth. Elizabeth's hand pressed once against the wool, a small steady reminder of presence. Her leading flank's blunderbuss did not lift. Her rear-man's eyes did not stop their flicker.

The cave mouth came closer.

Wildcard, Artoria thought, glancing once at the top of Will's head where his hair caught a stray edge of torchlight under her cloak. *He is the wildcard. The rest of them I can read.*

She could read Naruto - even Naruto, that strange unpolished boy with the bone-light under his skin and the ancient amused thing curled inside him. She could read Jack Sparrow's selfishness and the small noble fissures running through it. She could read Elizabeth, who was Will's though Will did not yet know it. She could read her own men down to the way they breathed under pressure.

Will, though.

Will was new in the world in the way she had once been new in the world - half-knowing, half-shaped, half-believing what he had been told he was. Cut his palm and a hundred undead pirates went still. He was a key, and keys, in her experience, had been known to turn in unexpected directions when the hand on them was the wrong hand.

He was the wildcard. She did not yet know which way he would turn.

She would have to make sure she was the hand on him.

The tunnel made one more bend. The cave mouth widened ahead. The cordon at its lip, still and grey, stood in its frozen attitudes, every blank eye-socket turned outward toward a sea it could not see.

Artoria Pendragon tightened her grip on Will's shoulder one fraction further, eased her stride to match his, and laid her free hand on the pommel of the sword she would not draw.

NARUTO'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

Three more clones popped in three more clouds of smoke, and Naruto felt the chakra-cost land in his calves like running barefoot on shale.

Two left, he thought, *and one if I'm being honest with myself.*

"Be honest with yourself, kid."

One left.

He spun under the next cutlass-arc, palm finding Barbossa's wrist on the way down and turning the swing wide enough for Jack to dance back out of it with a noise like a man laughing at his own funeral. Barbossa's curses roared at full volume now - the cavern had stopped echoing them because the echoes themselves were tired - and Naruto felt the bone in his right forearm shift again, restless, and pushed it back down.

Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.

Jack swung in his peripheral vision, sword turned showy, voice pitched into a register that Naruto had come to recognize as the *I am about to be very rude and very on-purpose* register.

"Hector, tell me - does the gold weigh different now? Heavier? Lighter? I imagine it must feel different, holding it with hands that don't quite belong to a man anymore. Like a borrowed coat. Borrowed pockets. Borrowed teeth."

Stay loud, Naruto thought. *Stay loud and stay angry and stay nowhere near actually thinking.*

Jack stayed loud.

"Tell me - when you sleep - *if* you sleep - does it ever feel like a small terrible relative is sleeping in your bones? Like the curse turns over in your skull at night and forgets your name once or twice before it remembers? Or has it been so long since you slept, Hector, that you've forgotten what forgetting feels like? Forgive me. I shouldn't ask. It must be a tender subject. Like asking a widower how the funeral went."

The cavern stopped echoing the curses because Barbossa had, for the first time since the cliff, gone quiet.

Naruto felt the stop before he saw it.

It was like a sail going slack in the wrong direction. It was like a pot lifted off the boil three minutes too soon. It was wrong in the body before it was wrong in the eye - Barbossa's blade, mid-arc, slowed, hung, and then *did not finish the swing*.

The captain of the Black Pearl lowered his cutlass.

Oh, Naruto thought.

Oh no.

"Kid," the Fox said behind his ribs, suddenly all the way awake, *"that did not sound like an angry man stopping."*

I know.

"That sounded like an angry man thinking."

I know.

Barbossa stood, breath sawing, eyes - eyes that had been red-edged with rage thirty seconds ago - gone cold and dry and considering. His beard moved as his jaw moved. He looked at Jack. He looked at Naruto. He looked, slowly, at his own cutlass, as if surprised to find it still in his hand.

"Now," he said.

His voice was almost conversational. That was the worst part. Anger Naruto could work with. Anger was a current. Anger could be steered.

This - this was a man who had just remembered he had options.

"Why," Barbossa said, slow, almost amused, "am I fighting you?"

The cavern carried the question into its own throat and sat with it.

Naruto did not move. Naruto did not breathe. Naruto kept his weight on the balls of his feet and his eyes on Barbossa's cutlass-hand and *did not let the panic land* - did not let it reach his shoulders, did not let it reach his face.

Barbossa nodded once, to himself.

"Why am I fighting you? When my crew - " he gestured, vague, languid, at the ranked silent figures on the upper terraces, " - could simply walk down those stairs and end you both where you stand. Could break the smaller bones first. Could take the rest of the evening over it, if I asked. Could *take notes*, if I asked."

He turned his hand. The cutlass turned with it. The torchlight caught the blade and turned it amber.

"Why," he asked the cavern softly, "would I bother my own arm?"

Naruto risked one glance at Jack.

Jack - Jack who could improvise a fortune out of a button and a shoelace - Jack met Naruto's eyes and gave the tiniest, most apologetic shrug Naruto had ever seen on a human face. *I didn't expect this either,* the shrug said. *I assumed he was less smart. My mistake.*

Barbossa raised both eyebrows. They were almost theatrical, those eyebrows, half-curious, half-delighted.

"And while we are asking - Sparrow. *Jack.* My old companion. Why are you here? If you'd lost," his cutlass dipped toward the empty cliff edge where the clone had gone over, "if you'd *truly* lost - you would have run. You always ran. Ran very prettily, in fact. It was your one consistent quality. So tell me - " he tilted his head, " - why have you stayed?"

He paused.

"What's the benefit, Jack?"

Benefit, Naruto thought, and felt his stomach drop somewhere below his boots.

"He has it," the Fox murmured, quiet now, no amusement left in him at all. *"He has the shape of it. He doesn't have the centre yet. He will get it."*

I know.

Naruto shook his head - small, almost imperceptible, not to Barbossa but to Jack. *Don't try to sell it. Don't.* Jack saw the head-shake. Jack ignored it.

Jack always ignored it.

"Benefit," Jack said, and his voice was suddenly half a tone higher, half a tone faster, the voice Jack used when his back was somewhere it ought not to be. "Hector. *Friend.* I'm wounded. I'm here for the company. The exquisite - really exquisite - company. The lighting. The acoustics. Have you considered acoustics, Hector? The way your voice carries off the stalactites is really - "

"Sparrow."

" - really very flattering, you know, a man your age - "

"*Sparrow.*"

Barbossa's voice did not rise. That was, again, the worst part. He simply said the name, and the air in the cavern thickened around the saying of it, and Jack went, very briefly, very perceptibly, silent.

Barbossa lifted his free hand.

He did not have to say anything. The figures on the upper terraces, on the cordon stairs, in the ranked alcoves - they straightened. All of them. At once. One unified hush of skeletal joints clicking into readiness, of dead muscle remembering the shape of orders.

They began to walk.

Naruto's bone-itch screamed *yes* under his skin and he set his feet and let half a finger's worth of it through. The coral-light flickered, faint, at his shoulders. The chakra he had been hoarding burned its way down into both palms in a thin desperate sheet.

Okay, he thought, *okay, plan, plan, plan -*

The undead at the upper terraces, the ones Naruto had not been paying full attention to because they had been frozen for the last ten minutes, all at once and as one, cocked their pistols.

Twelve hammers. Fifteen. Twenty.

The clicks fell into the cavern in a small bright awful rain.

Naruto froze.

"Nuh-uh, not this time, boy," Barbossa said, almost gentle, almost amused, almost - and this Naruto found genuinely unbearable - *patient*. "I could have you dead the moment I willed it. You're standing because I'm letting you stand. That's the new arrangement. You hear me?"

Naruto heard him.

"Kid," the Fox said, very low, *"do not move."*

I know.

"Now," Barbossa said, "what is it you're hiding?"

The question hung. Naruto felt it sit on his chest like a hand.

And then - slowly - slowly - the undead in the alcoves around him, the ones that had been frozen mid-gesture since the cliff, began to move.

Not toward him.

Not even fully - just settling. Shifting. Eye-sockets turning, with that small awful corrective slide of joints that had not moved in twenty minutes, *outward*. Toward the tunnel mouth. Toward the dark of the inner passages. Toward -

Oh, Naruto thought, with a clarity that arrived like a struck bell.

Oh, no.

He looked at Barbossa's face.

Barbossa's face had changed.

Not by much. A small narrowing of the eyes. A small tilt of the head. The same expression a man wore when he found, in a coat he hadn't worn for a season, a coin he had forgotten in the lining.

He's seeing, Naruto thought, half-stunned. *Through them. He's seeing what they see.*

"That is the theory," the Fox said, quiet. *"That is, I think, exactly the theory."*

The undead in the alcoves were turned now, every blank eye-socket aimed down the tunnel, down the long throat of dark that swallowed the cordon and the bend and the careful slow-walking shapes of Will and Elizabeth and Artoria moving toward the open air.

Barbossa's mouth moved.

It did not move toward the shape of an order. It moved toward the shape of a grin.

The grin was almost, almost a laugh - not the rage-laugh, not the captain-laugh, but the small private laugh of a man at a card table who has just realized which card the cheat has been hiding the whole night.

He had them. He knew it. He didn't need to say it yet.

Naruto set his feet harder against the gold-spilled stone and felt every last coin under his soles, hissing, slipping, telling him in the small dry voice of bad luck that he was about to need every option he had left.

WILL'S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

He could not take this anymore.

It was not the running - the running he could have done all night, the running he had been bred into by twenty years of forge-work and bellows and lifting hammer-heads that would have unsettled men twice his age. It was not even the fear, which had settled in his ribs hours ago and stayed there like a tenant he had given up trying to evict.

It was the *shape* of being escorted.

Will Turner walked under the wool of a Royal Navy captain's cloak with the woman he loved at his other elbow and her hand pressed against his back, and a captain - a *captain*, an officer with a commission and a ship and her name in His Majesty's books - taking each careful step beside him as though he were cargo. As though he were something precious. As though he were worth the cost.

He was not worth the cost.

He knew this with the same clarity he knew the weight of a finished sword. Captain Artoria Pendragon should not be in this tunnel. She should not be cloaking him in her own coat. She should not be risking her ship, her men, her sworn allegiance to a chain of command that had

not, at any point, authorised her to walk into Isla de Muerta for the sake of a blacksmith with the wrong father.

But she was here.

She had not given any sign of resenting the cost. That was perhaps the worst part. She had a captain's economy in her walking and a captain's economy in her silences and she carried him forward through the dark as though it were simply what an honourable person did, on a Tuesday, between watches.

She should not be doing this for me, he thought. *None of them should.*

Elizabeth's hand pressed against his back inside the cloak. The small steady pressure of her fingers. The shape of her body taking the same careful steps as his. He felt her breath against his shoulder.

He should not be letting Elizabeth do this for him either. Elizabeth, who would have been safe in Port Royal tonight. Elizabeth, who had a father and a future and a house with proper rooms in it.

Stop, he told himself. *Walk. Eyes on the floor.*

He walked. He kept his eyes on the floor. The floor was old volcanic stone, polished by tide and time, glittering here and there with a stray coin some long-ago pirate had dropped and not bothered to chase. The torchlight slid across it. His blood, dripping from the bandaged palm beneath his sleeve, had not yet reached the floor - Artoria's wool was thick.

Then the tunnel changed.

The undead in the alcoves - the things that had been frozen in their half-decayed postures for the entire walk so far - *jolted*.

It was not a slow waking. It was not the careful corrective slide he had glimpsed earlier. It was a clean instantaneous *snap* into being, the way a hammer-blow brought a piece of cold iron suddenly to its purpose, the way a bell rang when struck. One moment they had been still. The next they were not.

A barnacled head turned.

Its empty eye-sockets found him.

It sees me, Will thought, in a clarity that arrived with the calm of catastrophe. *It sees me specifically.*

Another head turned. Another. Another. Down the line of alcoves, like dominoes - the dominoes being skulls, and the surface being torchlight, and the falling being the slow concert of mouldering jaws all swinging open to face him at once.

They knew him.

They had not known him a moment ago. They had been pieces of furniture, accidental, ignored, ignoring. Now they were a host. Now they were the chorus that turned and looked when the right note was played, and the note was *his blood*, and the blood had been the key all along.

A cutlass came out of nowhere and went for Elizabeth.

It missed by less than the width of a coin. Will felt the breath of it across his own neck before he understood that it had been aimed at her. Elizabeth gasped - a small, half-bitten sound, not a

scream, not yet - and Artoria's body shifted at his other elbow in the precise, settled, irrevocable way a captain's body shifted when she had decided.

Her hand was on the pommel of her sword.

Not the grip - the pommel. The way a person held a thing they were not drawing as a sword. The way a person held a thing whose proper name was about to enter the air.

She was going to draw it.

Will could not have explained how he knew. He had known her perhaps a single day in this present-tense world. He had not seen her in combat at full extension. He had not been told what she carried at her hip. But he knew, the way he knew a strike was going wrong before the hammer landed - he knew she was about to *draw it*.

He also knew that whatever she drew it as would not, when sheathed again, be sheathed back into the same world.

"No," Will said.

It came out small. He cleared his throat and said it again, larger.

"No."

He stepped out from under the cloak.

The cool tunnel air hit him with the small startling intimacy of a slap. He turned. He faced the host of skull-faced figures along the alcoves. He raised both hands, palm forward, the bandaged one bright with seep where his blood had finally found the air.

"Alright," he said.

He surprised himself with how steady his voice was.

"Alright, alright. I'll come with."

He could feel Artoria behind him. He did not look at her. If he looked at her he would lose his nerve and she would draw the thing and the night would end in a way he could not undo. He kept his eyes on the host.

"Take me," he said, "to your leader."

The undead looked at him.

Their eyes - the dark hollow places where eyes used to be - did not register what he had said. There was no flicker of triumph. There was no nod of acknowledgement. They looked at him with the same flat absence with which an axe looked at a tree.

Then they began to move.

Not toward him. Around him.

Two on his left flank, three on his right, falling into a loose escort cordon of barnacled bone and crusted cloth, the way trained crewmen fell into formation around a captured officer. The smell of

them came off them in the still air - the smell of long water and old salt and something that had been wet for too long inside.

A laugh sounded from the inner cave.

Distant. Echoed. Unmistakable. It came down the long throat of the tunnel from the gold-vault behind them, soft, amused, the laugh of a man at a card table who had just turned over the card his opponent had been counting on him not to see.

Barbossa's laugh. He had been listening. He had been listening the whole time, through their eyes, through their sockets, through every alcove they had crept past.

The escort had been a stage all along. They had simply been the last to know.

"No," Elizabeth said.

It was not the small bitten sound from before. It was a full word now. It carried.

"Will, no. *No.* Get back under the cloak. Get back - "

"Elizabeth - "

" - get *back* under the cloak, Will Turner, you do not, you do *not*, I forbid - "

"Elizabeth - "

" - I will *drag* you, I swear to God, I will - "

He turned, finally, because he had to.

Her face under the cloak's edge was very pale. Her mouth was open around a word she had not finished. Her eyes were the eyes of someone who had just understood what was happening and had not yet been given permission to refuse it.

He had to say it now. He would not have it later. He was practical that way - he had always been practical that way - the forge taught a man what could be finished in this heat and what could not. This could not be finished later.

"Elizabeth," he said, and his voice was steady because his hands were the ones shaking.

"I love you."

She made a small, broken sound.

"I have loved you since - since I cannot remember when not. Since the boat from England, perhaps. Since you took me by the wrist when no one else would. I have loved you all the wrong amount, in all the wrong directions, in all the wrong rooms, and I have not said it because I have not had the right to say it, and tonight I have decided that I no longer care about the right to say it."

"Will - "

"I love you. Forgive me. Go."

"Will - "

He stepped backward into the cordon of skeletal pirates.

They closed around him in the easy unconcerned way that water closed around a thrown stone. The skull at his left elbow turned its empty face down to look at his bandaged hand, and did not lift it, and did not need to. The skull at his right shoulder fell into step.

"WILL - "

Elizabeth's voice cracked into a scream behind him. He heard it land in the tunnel walls. He heard it carry. He did not turn around. He could not - turning around would unmake him.

Artoria's voice, very low, very calm, behind him: "Hold her."

A second pair of arms catching Elizabeth. Elizabeth's elbow striking against wool. Elizabeth's heels scraping. The captain's quiet, "*Hold her, sailor. Do not let her past me.*"

The cordon walked him forward.

Will Turner kept his eyes on the dark mouth of the tunnel ahead and his hands open at his sides and the bandage on his palm burning slow and certain, and he walked toward the laugh.

NARUTO’S POV
AROUND THE SAME TIME…

Barbossa was speaking.

Barbossa had been speaking for a little while now, which was the second-worst thing he could have been doing - the worst being silent. Anger Naruto could work with. This was not anger. This was a man enjoying himself.

"Bone-trick. Smoke-trick. Clone-trick. Whatever-trick. Honestly, lad, I don't think I've enjoyed a misunderstanding so thoroughly in ten years."

He paced two steps to the left along the lip of the cliff, hands behind his back, cutlass slack in one of them. Twenty pistol-hammers were still cocked in the upper terraces above Naruto's head. Twenty barnacled fingers rested on twenty triggers. The clicks of the hammers had not faded out of the cavern; they hung in it like motes of dust at noon.

"Kid," the Fox said, very quiet.

Not now.

"It's been a good first mission, kid."

Not. Now.

Barbossa kept going.

"The Turner boy lives. The boy I have hunted for ten years. Walking, even now, escorted by my crew, back to me - because, in his very large, very stupid heart, he believes that handing himself over will protect his friends. That's beautiful. That's *touching*. That's the sort of moral instinct the navy publishes pamphlets about, isn't it? *Self-sacrifice. The honest man's gambit.*"

He smiled. The smile reached the corners of his eyes.

"It will not protect his friends."

Naruto felt his stomach turn - actually, physically, the sensation of a sail going slack inside him, of a thing dropping in him that he had been holding up by main effort and had finally lost the strength for.

"You will all die," Barbossa said, conversationally, the way another captain might describe the prevailing wind.

"Your colleagues. Your noble lady captain. The governor's screaming daughter. Sparrow, who is owed it. You, who have earned it. The Turner boy after the ritual - naturally, once the curse is properly lifted off my crew, the blacksmith is surplus. He will die last. He will watch the rest of you go first. I think he will appreciate that. I think his moral instincts will find it instructive."

Barbossa spread his hands.

"All will be well in the world. Less pirates for the navy to worry about. Fewer interesting lights at sea for the great world to be troubled by. The map will be a quieter place by morning."

Jack made a small sound at Naruto's elbow. It was not a word. It was the sound a man made when he had been about to bluff and had just been told, with politeness, that bluffing would not be necessary.

Think, Naruto thought.

Think, think, think, think -

He couldn't think.

He looked down at his hands. They were shaking. The bone-itch under the skin of his right forearm had stopped pressing for permission. Even his body knew. His body had felt the gambit go, the same way it had felt the bridge fall under him, the same way it had felt the senbon find his shoulder, the same way it always knew before his head caught up.

Davy Jones, he thought, half-prayer, half-bargain, half-shame at how easily he had reached for it. *If you were here. If you were anywhere near here. If there were any signal - anything - any whistle, any token, any small dropped word that says I'm in trouble and you should come -*

There was no signal. Davy Jones had given him no whistle, no flare, no token. He had been given a contract and a teaching and a strange new body and a great patron-shadow, and he had been told to be *useful*, and the unspoken corollary of being useful was that on the night the bone-trick and the smoke-trick and the clone-trick all collapsed in a single cavern, no one in particular was coming to find him.

He had wanted to be useful. He had been useful. He had been useful right up until the last clever turn, which had unsewn itself in front of him while a man with an apple in his pocket smiled politely.

"Kid," the Fox said again, and the tone of it was the tone of an old animal who had decided not to fight the wind anymore. *"It has been a good first mission. Truly. Better than mine. Some of those clones, I will admit, were excellent."*

Don't, Naruto thought.

"Maybe we see them all in the next life, kid. Whichever shore that turns out to be."

Don't.

He shook his head. He did it in his thoughts, because in his body any motion now would draw a pistol-eye. He shook his head and he held the *no* in his chest until it stopped trembling and started doing something useful.

There's a way out, he thought, with no evidence at all, with the kind of stubbornness that was the only thing he had ever reliably owned. *There's a way. I just have to think. Give me a minute.*

"Kid - "

Give me a minute. Please.

The Fox did not answer. The Fox sometimes did not answer when Naruto said *please*. Naruto thought it was because the word embarrassed both of them.

Down the long throat of the tunnel, footsteps.

Soft footsteps. Patient. The unhurried patience of skeletal feet not afraid of being late. Naruto turned his head a fraction - not enough to draw a pistol-flick, just enough - and saw them come.

Will first.

Will walking under his own power, hands at his sides, his back too straight, the way men walked when they had decided. Five undead in a loose ring around him. No one touching him. He was leading himself.

Behind Will, in a tighter cordon, Artoria and Elizabeth.

Artoria's hand was empty. Her sword was still at her hip. Her face was the face of a captain who had made a decision under pressure and intended to live with the consequences of having made it. Elizabeth's face was very pale, and her mouth was set, and there were tears on her cheeks that she did not seem to know were there.

They were not under any cloak now. They were hostages. The cordon at their flanks held cutlasses low and ready, blades angled toward soft ribs. They were not being escorted. They were being *kept*.

Naruto's stomach turned again. He had run out of stomach to turn.

Will walked the last few yards into the cavern and stopped, on his own, where the cordon's ring stopped, in the centre of the floor under the cliff. He raised his bandaged hand a fraction so Barbossa could see it.

"I'm what you want," Will said.

His voice was steady. Whatever it had cost him to get it steady, it was steady.

"So I'm here. Take me. Start the ritual. Just - " he turned his face slightly, just slightly, toward Artoria and Elizabeth and Jack and Naruto, " - just let them go. When I die. When the ritual takes. Let them leave. That's the bargain. I'm offering it."

He looked at Naruto then. Just for a half-instant.

The look said: *Forgive me. I had to.*

Naruto closed his eyes.

He closed his eyes and felt the cavern around him - the cocked pistols, the lapping echo of Barbossa's polite footstep-pacing, the smell of long water and old salt, the small still warmth of Jack's elbow against his own, the shake in his own hands he could not stop. He closed his eyes and saw Will's straight back.

Will's straight back, and Will's noble bargain, and Will's calm certain belief that Hector Barbossa would honour a deal made in a cave full of skeletons by a man who had already announced, two minutes earlier, the order in which the rest of them would be killed.

All this, Naruto thought, *for nothing.*

The Fox said nothing. The Fox was, perhaps, also closing his eyes.

All this. Because he wanted to be a hero. Because he is the kind of man who walks into a cave full of skeletons believing his death will be a currency.

Because Will Turner is noble.

And nobility doesn't read its enemies.

He opened his eyes.

Barbossa was, predictably, smiling.

He had not interrupted Will's offer. He had let Will finish it. He had let the entire bargain land in the cavern like a coin spinning on a table, and now he tilted his head as a man tilts his head at a coin that has fallen the wrong face up, and his smile widened a fraction further, and that was the only answer Will Turner was ever going to receive.

Naruto looked at his shaking hands and tried, for the third time in five minutes, to think of a single thing he could do that would not get every person in this cavern killed.

End.

Hope you all liked the chapter.

And see you all on the next update.