Flawless Blue

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Flawless Blue

by SilverHypnos

Summary

An alternate universe where Meteor City is actually an island surrounded by a turbulent cursed ocean. Practically everyone exists there undocumented, and has been the perfect place for pirates and criminals alike. This story centers around the two main couples, navigating and rekindling an old flame that vanished fifteen years ago. Which would have been simple, if, ya know, both Feitan and Chrollo weren't sirens.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Nothing beats gazing into the sunset, watching the world swallowed by the horizon. Phinks strolled over, allowing his toes to snuggle the sand. Feeling the texture, the warmth, the salty-tang breeze that filled the air. The rise and fall of the waves followed a rhythmic pattern. All of it was captivating.

Meteor Cove is an island so far from society that the people here exist undocumented. It became a perfect paradise for those who wished to remain hidden. Criminals, pirates, and the living myth. Everyone had a unique reason why they were here.

Walking along the beach, he reminisced about the times he missed. It was bittersweet remembering the nostalgia of carefree fun. It was only by sheer accident that Phinks stumbled into this group of kids.

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It was a sweltering summer day; Phinks, Shal, and Franklin were playing tag when they encountered a group of unfamiliar children. Hindsight is 20-20, or so the saying goes. There were obvious strange signs that went over his head back then. When Phinks approached them, their reaction was hostile and nervous. It was only after the smallest one, a girl who waved back, that the guard they had dropped.

No matter how short those times were, their names lived rent-free in his mind. Chrollo, Paku, Sarasa, Nobunaga, and Feitan. Those five could only be described as peculiar. An aura of mysticism surrounded them. While they looked human, nothing about them added up.

How, except Sarasa, they refused to hang out in town. They would only play near the beach where the ocean was in view. When night fell, they refused to allow anyone to escort them home. Phinks never saw them once walking home. Instead, those kids would wait along the beachside. Dodging personal questions about where they lived, or who their wet nurses were. Their secretive nature was frustrating at times.

Still, those summer days were the best moments of his life. How all of his friends clicked with them. Sheila adored Sarasa to the point where it was almost unbearable. She dreamt of becoming an adventurer. She'd ramble on about her desire to explore the world with Sarasa. To absorb what the world had to offer and more. Sarasa seemed to be on board, much to her friend's chagrin.

Uvo, a teenager who occasionally hung out with Phinks, was excited to meet another teen like him. Uvo's friendship with Nobu quickly became play sparring, constantly fighting. However, in moments when they thought no one was looking, they'd relax and enjoy the stars.

Machi was a girl who, despite clinging to the group, never socialized with anyone. At first, they all thought she was shy, but she had this cold "You're wasting my time" demeanor. Her wet nurses always complained about how un-childlike she was. This didn't help her guarded personality. So, imagine Phink's bewilderment when Machi slowly got along with Paku. For the first time in ages, Machi cracked a little smile when looking up at Paku, presenting as a real child should. Paku had that personality, someone you could open up to and trust. It was honestly sweet to see Machi in a different light.

Phinks chuckled to himself, remembering how obsessive Shal was with Chrollo. Shalnark was the kind of kid who, for lack of a better term, was a little shit. The number of times Phinks would threaten Shal for his smartass quips was never-ending. However, Shal was like that with everyone, except for that one boy. He'd call it as he saw it; it was special treatment. Granted, Phinks only started to tease Shal because Shal did it first.

The sheer amount of soulmate, romance, and couple jokes Shal threw at Phinks was ungodly. Feitan was someone who Phinks got attached to the most. To be clear, he totttttttttally was not obsessed with that guy. They were just bros. Homies. Friends. At least, back then, that's how it was. Phinks didn't even understand the concept of romance and attraction back then. All of those desires were proof to him of his platonic bond with Fei.

I *want* to see Fei.
I *want* to hang out with Fei.
I *want* to know more about Fei.
I *want* to prank Shal and Chro with Fei.
I *want* to discover something cool with Fei.
I am at my happiest when Feitan is by my side.
I want to live the rest of my life to the fullest with Fei.

Now, with hindsight, he wasn't so sure if it was all entirely platonic. As he grew up, looking back to the past, it became more obvious that the bond he had with Fei was different. Not a single friendship ever came close to the burning fire he felt when he was with his other half. But maybe that was just rose-colored nostalgia talking. Maybe that bond was never real.

One day, out of the blue, vanishing like a ghost, those kids never returned.

Every day, Phinks and the others would spend time calling out their names. Revisiting the same spot they always played. It got to the point where they'd run into town, asking if they had seen those kids. It was as if they were fighting against the world, describing a ghost they never knew. Worse of all, some of the adults were convinced these kids were just imaginary. Another one of those darn kids' stupid pranks.

Everyone was devastated.

Sheila cried for days, withering herself away from the group. Her obsession with Sarasa turned into something deranged. Creating a doll to represent Sarasa, playing with only Sarasa. It wasn't long until she vanished one night. She didn't say much, just expressed to Shal that she was following her dream. Of being an explorer, to see the world with... Sarasa.

Uvo had a similar idea to Sheila, except he never found something to replace Nobu. He was ungodly pissed that Nobu left without a goodbye and swore he'd travel the outside world just to unearth him.

Machi reverted to what she once was. An ice queen, an isolationist who slowly stopped hanging out with them.

Soon it was just Phinks, Shal, and Franklin again. Though Franklin was always more of Shal's friend than his. Franklin was always the pragmatic one between the three. He advised them to get over it. There was no point in destroying oneself for the past, as he put it.

Then, in Meteor Cove, it was just Shal and Phinks. Making daily routines to walk along the beachside. But nothing came of it. Day in, day out, *nothing...* Until a few months later, it just became Phinks. Bitterly, Phinks remembered that conversation he had with Shal on the docks, staring at the boundless stretch of blue.

"Phinks, Franklin was right." Shal sighed, swaying his legs.

"What?! Not you too! Don't ***you*** want to know what happened to Chrollo?" Phinks exclaimed.

"Of course I do. Just as much as you do with Fei. Or well, maybe not as much." *He cracked in a joke at a time like this?* Shal chuckled and exhaled, "But we have to be realistic about this."

Phinks pouted, "I don't want to be realistic about it."

"Then, would you like to hear something crazy?" Shal gave him a smile, but his eyes looked mischievous.

"What?" Phinks blinked, leaning forward.

"The adults that accused us of playing with imaginary friends might have been on to something."

"WHAT!" Phinks glared. "Oh, c'mon, you know that isn't true!" Was Shal seriously trying to gaslight him right now?

"Hear me out." His demeanor looked serious, and he shifted his gaze back to the horizon. "Those five human kids never existed in Meteor Cove. We asked almost every wet nurse on this island, and none of them recognized the descriptions we provided. We know that those kids were strange, refusing to show or tell us where they lived."

"So, you think they were vacationing here or something?" Phinks raised an eyebrow.

Shal shook his head. "I did consider it, but what were the chances of five kids vacationing together and refusing to admit it?"

"I dunno. But what other options are there?" Phinks shrugged.

"Have you ever heard of the myth? An old fisherman's legend that only the elders here seem to believe in." Shal glanced over.

"Um, no?"

"They say the reason why no government tries to colonize Meteor Cove is because of its location. Right in the center of a cursed part of the ocean, turning most ships into ghosts in a mere night. Most adults say that it's not a curse, but rather could be explained away by science."

Phinks hummed a little while listening to Shal, trying to figure out where he was going with this.

"However, there is a myth that lingering within the waters are creatures; the true culprit of the ship wreckage. Monsters ranging from the Kraken, a living megalodon, to something smaller and more sinister. Sirens, or merpeople." Shal's demeanor was blank. Phinks couldn't tell if this was one of his jokes or if he was serious.

"Huh?"

Changing his position, he began to hug his legs to his chest. "Don't you think it's weird how fast we were allured and attached to them? How their mysticism become our obsession? Didn't Fei try to lure you into the ocean multiple times? Di-"

Curdly, Phinks cut him off, "Are you seriously trying to convince me that my best friend is a ***fish?!***"

Shal gave him a disgruntled expression. He stood up and dusted away the sand on his shorts before looking down on him. "No. I'm saying your boyfriend is a fish!" He had that smug grin on.

"He's NOT MY ***BOYFRIEND!***" Phink shot up, towering over Shal. How many times did he have to tell Shal that?! "YOU-YOUR!" He was stumbling over his words, his head red with embarrassment. Words were never his forte, but violence was. He screamed, **"WELL, YOUR BOYFRIEND'S A FISH!"** while pushing Shal off the docks and into the ocean.

Gasping for air, Shal freaked out, "Phin-ks, Hel-p!"

Phinks rolled his eyes, but the more he listened to his friend's panic, the more concerned he felt. "Alright, fine, fine!" He shouted before jumping in to fix the mess he started.

He dragged Shal by the arm to the shores before plopping himself beside him. Staring up at the purple sky, he exhaled, pondering to himself. Not that he really did believe in Shal's crazy theory, but if Fei was really a siren, would that even matter to him? If Fei was just a siren, he'd already had so many chances to eat him alive. Wouldn't the fact that he's still alive, uneaten, mean the bond between them was real?

Phinks shook his head; these thoughts were crazy. He chuckled, "So, let's pretend your crazy theory is true. If you were to meet Chrollo again, what would you do knowing that he's a

siren?"

Shal turned to Phinks with a blank smile. "Put him in a fish tank so he can never leave me again." It was probably a joke, a crude one. Phinks shifted his body, pushing away from Shal with a disgusted look. "What, c'mon, I'm only kidding. I'd never do that!" Shal lightly slapped his arm, almost offended that Phinks took it seriously.

"I dunno, sometimes you worry me. You tease people like a sadist." Phinks shrugged while still giving him a judgemental look.

Shal laughed, propping himself up. "You really seem to have a type."

"What type?" Phinks got up with a bewildered look.

"Sadist." Shal shrugged. "Well, I'm nowhere near as bad as Fei."

Phinks gave him a disgruntled sigh. There was a long silent pause. "So, you're really giving up on them?"

"Giving up is a strong word. I like to see it as I'm not letting it control my life. If I find clues, I'll look into it. I just won't look for them daily. I won't spend the rest of my life chasing a ghost." Shal rose, wiping the sand off his skin. Or at least, he tried to.

"I see..." Phinks paused. It was logical, but he still couldn't escape the thoughts about them.

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Over time, he spent less and less time looking for them. He turned running around the beach into a daily morning routine, but it became more of an exercise regimen.

It's been fifteen years since he last saw Feitan. The faces of the other kids started to blur, but Feitan's face was the one thing he held onto. Refusing to let that memory fade away with the passage of time. Walking along the beachside, right where the tide barely reaches, Phinks inhales the aroma of the sea.

So much has changed in the last fifteen years, yet nothing at all. Phinks was in his late 20s, living a life that felt incomplete. He worked as a bodyguard at the local pub, throwing out pirates who dared to draw their swords inside. It wasn't out of morality, just a job with an excuse to get violent without much repercussion. At least, nothing he couldn't handle. He's not as big as Uvo, but his physique could only be described as stacked and brawny.

It's been fifteen years, he kept reminding himself. At this point, if he did see Fei again, he didn't know if he'd embrace him or beat the living shit out of him. Nothing was able to replace what he felt with Fei. What was once poetic turned bitter. Not even the on-and-off fling he had with Shalnark came close. Which was embarrassing to admit, though he didn't regret it. They were just friends who were experimenting, but the romance was never there.

Their hearts were stolen years ago; it was only a question of whether those hearts could still beat.

"I should really head back home." He sighed, plopping his sneakers onto the sand. Slipping his foot in, he gazed forward. "Right, there's a grotto not far from here."

When Shal's antics became unbearable, Feitan would show Phinks this little grotto he found. It wasn't that hidden, but with the arches of the cliffs, it felt like a secret hideaway. A place where Fei and Phinks could hang out without judgment.

It's been a month since he last inspected that place. He really should be heading back home, but. "It wouldn't hurt to check." He muttered to himself. Head first into the ice-cold waters and propelling himself forward with the rhythmic movement of his arms. Inside the grotto, there should have been a patch of rocks, almost like a pathway where Phinks could walk.

"Shit, it really is dark at night." He sighed, grabbing the lighter in his pockets. "Hope this thing still lights." He flicked it several times. It took a good minute before the fssh, followed by the small flame that illuminated dimly. Slowly walking, surrounded by the white noise of the waves and the echoes of his footsteps.

While dragging his feet, he flickered when his foot grazed something that felt like a tool. Lowering his body and the light to the ground, he saw a man-made spear, covered in dried but rather fresh blood.

"What the-" he exclaimed, wondering how and why something like this was here. While looking around the rocks, he heard the faintest noise. Like a nail scraping against a rock, it felt out of place. Phinks looked towards the direction of the noise, slowly approaching.

A slithering dark figure, what was once still, became more hostile with every step Phinks took. The sound of nails scraping against the rocks, along with a threatening hiss, echoed in the grotto. Perhaps it was the creature's way of warning Phinks; however, the only thought in his head was, "What the fuck kind of animal is that?"

Looming the light forward, the slithering figure had a long, fish-like tail, with beautiful iridescent black scales. However, there was a prominent wound in the middle; blood gushed out with every aggressive whip movement it made. Panning over the light upward, he froze when the scales became gradient; it blended into a pale white body of a human.

"Have you ever heard of the myth? An old fishermen's legend that only the elders here seem to believe in." Shal's words echoed in his head as Phinks hesitated to luminate the area where the face would be.

As he moved the lighter, the first thing he saw was silky short black hair that covered the eyes. His fangs were out, much like shark teeth, hissing at the large figure. This siren looked petite, or at least, if it had human legs, it would have been. It was unreal. He kept glancing back and forth, at the human physique, back to the fish-like tail.

Murmuring to himself, "With the number of horror stories of your kind eating people, I'd thought your kind's true form would be ugly."

The hissing and tail-wiping only got more aggressive, as if it understood what he said. Stupidly, not reading the room, Phinks attempted to touch the siren. "Is this seriously real?"

The siren, out of reflex, snatched his arm, digging its nail into it. It hurt, but not enough to deter Phinks. He shone the lighter closer, leaning in to get a better look at the creature's face.

It's been fifteen years since he saw Feitan's face.

Phinks froze as if he saw a ghost.

"Fei?"

The creature was about to lunge and bite his face off but flinched as he spoke his name. The expression became less hostile and more skeptical.

Staring up and down his body, he spoke again, "You're Feitan, right? Fei!" The dream of reuniting with his best friend was something he accepted to be just that, a dream. Face to face with a fantasy, he couldn't believe his eyes. "It's me, Phinks. Don't you remember, fifteen years ago we-" He was getting all choked up.

"Phi...nks." The grip on his arm loosened, along with the decline of the tail wips and aggression.

So many questions raced through his mind. As much as he wanted to bombard him with all of them, he couldn't at that moment. He was lost in that moment.

Fifteen years...

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

It's been fifteen years since he saw Feitan's face.

Phinks froze as if he had seen a ghost. A spectator of nostalgia glared right at him. The tail whipped aggressively, positioning itself to attack.

"Fei?"

The creature was about to lunge and bite his face off but flinched as he spoke his name. The expression became less hostile and more skeptical. Pushing back, analyzing the human who had just spoken.

Staring up and down his body, he spoke again, "You're Feitan, right? Fei!" The dream of reuniting with his best friend was something he accepted to be just that, a dream. Face to face with the fantasy he couldn't believe was real. "It's me, Phinks. Don't you remember, fifteen years ago we-" He was getting all choked up.

"Phi...nks," The grip on his arm loosens, along with the decline of the tail wips and aggression. His expression falters to something ambivalent, a manner that Phinks didn't recognize. Being able to read Fei was a skill he was proud of, as back then, since he was a kid with few words. Emotions indicated shock, tension, stress, regret, and denial.

So many questions raced through his mind. As much as he wanted to bombard him with all of them, he couldn't at that moment. He was lost in that moment. Trying to focus, his gaze led downwards, back to the fish parts of him. Back to the gash where his blood was still oozing out. That's when it clicked: the reason why the bloody spear was lying on the rocks.

Phinks thought about asking, *what happened?* However, it only led to more questions. If sirens are seen as a myth, then why was he injured by a human weapon? Would Phinks be able to carry Fei out of the cave at night with that injury gushing open? Even if he managed to get Fei back to his place, he's not a doctor. How does a person treat a siren's wound?

Phinks shook his head; he was overthinking. Logically, stopping the bleeding would be the right thing to do.

"Fei, can you hold this? Don't drop it." Phinks pointed to the lighter he was holding. Fei gave a bewildered look. Staring at the lighter, then back at Phinks. Despite that, he reached out to hold the lighter.

Phinks immediately removed his tank top, which only caused an overwhelming feeling of bewilderment within Fei. Phinks looked down at the wound, wondering how the hell he was going to tie his shirt around that. Phinks shrugged, figuring that he'd need to lift his bottom half to wrap it around him. Impulsively grabbing his waist, Fei's tail whipped around and smacked Phinks square in the face.

"Explain first before touching." Ah, there's the aggression again.

"I'm trying to stop your bleeding by wrapping this around it. Keeping an open wound like that isn't a good idea." Choosing to ignore that slap, though, the sting on his cheek lingers. "I have to lift you to wrap this thing around. You're bleeding a lot..."

"I've had worse injuries." Fei shrugged, with his tough facade, just like back then.

"With how often we both got into fights, I bet you have." He snickered before sighing. "So, can I lift you a bit just to wrap this around, Fei?"

Fei shifted himself against the rocky walls of the cave. "Make it quick."

Fei's skin seemed to shudder when Phinks lifted him up from underneath his lower back this time. The heat that emanated from his palm nearly melted the icy cold skin of the siren. After sliding the shirt under where the wound would be, he gently placed Fei down before figuring out the most effective way to tie up the shirt.

There was a long, awkward silence before Phinks murmured, "You feel colder than I remember."

"I'm supposed to feel cold." Feitan curtly responded while Phinks tightened the knot.

Phinks looked around the cave and the grotto, thinking to himself how his apartment would be a safer healing spot for Fei than this place. "I think you'd heal faster and safer if I got you out of here. My apartment complex is right near the shore; it's not that far at all."

"You have an apartment?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, a lot has changed in fifteen years, Fei." Phinks was still holding off on asking him why. *Why did he vanish without a word? Why did it take fifteen years just to meet up again? If meeting in this cave was by sheer accident, then would Fei ever reach out to see him again?* Those fifteen years hurt like hell.

Fei avoided eye contact. His expression appeared remorseful, but there was a hidden layer to it.

"Fei, let me carry you out of here, okay?"

His expression went judgmental; it was hard to tell why, however. The tail flickered in ways that would suggest agitation. “Not an option,” he grunted.

“Why? People who are out this late are usually too drunk to remember anything. No one will see you.” Assuming that was the issue.

“Unable to transform.” He hissed.

“Is it because you're injured? Well, you could just heal at my place, and then that won't be an issue anymore.” Phinks couldn't shake the feeling that Fei was, yet again, trying to place distance between them. Not physically, but emotionally, metaphorically.

Fei shook his head with a tongue click. “Not how things work.”

It was true. Phinks had no idea how sirens work. For the longest time, there was no evidence that they even existed until now. This revelation only adds more layers to the pile of questions he was suppressing.

“Either way, I'm not leaving you here alone.” Life was tiresome when he chose to be selfless. Every bone in his body wanted to be selfish. He waited fifteen years. Fifteen fucking years.

“You're stubborn as ever.”

“Yeah, and? You really think I'd just walk away from my injured best friend who vanished fifteen years ago?!” The cat's out of the bag, or should he say the fish. It's out. He didn't intend to shout as loudly as he did, but he couldn't suppress it any longer.

It fell silent in that cave.

Fei’s gaze strayed away, focusing on the rhythmic waves that pulled and pushed into the grotto. He murmured under his breath, “On one condition. After I heal, I go back.” He stared at the ocean. “Back to the ocean.”

Phink's expression faltered momentarily before nodding, “Deal.” How ironic now that Phinks understood what Shal meant when he joked about keeping a siren in a fish tank. However, Fei isn't a fish or an object to him.

Fei handed Phinks the lighter, and he put it back into his pockets. Scooping the siren up, the sensation of the different textures on his skin was the first thing he noticed. Even the human parts of his body felt off. It was cold like a corpse, except soft like a living human. The tip of his tail ended up wrapping itself around Phink’s arm.

“You're going to need to hold on more than that, Fei.” There was something about how he positioned himself in his arms. As if his top half was avoiding being pressed against Phink’s chest.

He rolled his eyes and wrapped his arms around his neck. “Hurry up.” Hissing his demands.

With that, Phinks carefully, while holding him with one arm, used the other to swim towards the beach. Due to the extra luggage, it did take a bit longer than he expected. Making sure the coast was clear before power walking across the sands.

“You don't have to cling as much anymore, Fei.” It was a surprise to him. He would have expected that the moment he emerged from the water, Fei would have already unwrapped his arms.

The grunt that he made was delayed. Sluggishly removing his tangled arms, his left hand traced over Phink’s shoulder before gripping it. The grip was far weaker than it was before, and his breathing was lethargic. “You're so warm.” He mumbled.

“Yeah?” Perhaps Fei didn't know that adult males tend to produce a lot of heat. If he's been avoiding humanity for fifteen years, there are probably many things he doesn't know about humans. "We're almost there."

As expected, it went smoothly. Transferring Fei from the grotto to his apartment. However, the more Phinks thought about it, the more he became concerned by Fei's lethargic state. Something was amiss.

Plopping himself onto the side of the bed, Fei's tail and hand were still gripping Phinks. Was he sick? "Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm... fine..." He was not fine; the sudden shift to a sleepy state was not something he could ignore.

Phinks reached for the phone he had left on the nightstand. Scrolling through his contacts, he considered it. "Hey, Fei, I'm going to let Shal know; I think he's more equipped to help you than I am."

"Shal...?" At this point, he was practically unconscious.

To Phink's dismay, the phone rang for a minute. No answer. Tried again. No answer. "What the hell, Shal?!" Phinks muttered to himself. Frustrated, he began to text him.

[12:03 am]

Phinks: Shal, this is an emergency!
Phinks: Either pick up or show up at my place.
Phinks: I know you still have the spare key.
Phinks: I found Fei.
Phinks: He's unwell and badly injured!

It usually doesn't take Shal this long to respond. On days like this, he's usually at the pub drinking, but not enough to get drunk. Unlike Phinks, Shal has always been glued to his phone the moment he got one. Minutes dreadfully felt like hours, as Phinks stared at his messages, waiting for a reply.

[12:14 am]

Shal: Okay, I'll be there in a few.
Shal: Congrats on finding your fish boyfriend!
Shal: Also, I'm bringing a surprise with me.
Phinks: What do you mean by a surprise? This is urgent!
Shal: Let's just say... Finding Fei may not have been a coincidence.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

"I should tell him..." Gently tapping his phone's side, Shalnark found himself perplexed by his hesitation.

"Auugghh!" Shalnark let out a loud sigh, feeling burdened by others' emotions. Walking all over Phink's feelings was easy when he was still in denial. However, ever since that brute confided in him a few years ago, that dreadful thought has been creeping in.

"What if I told you I have a lead, but don't get your hopes up." That sounded objective enough, and yet, perhaps it was because he knew Phinks all too well. He's an impulsive idiot who gets his hopes up and then crashes when it leads nowhere.

Still, this has been the best lead he had since...

Shalnark shook his head; his hesitance wasn't a weakness. If Phinks got his hopes up and mopes, he'd pester Shal for weeks. He had to keep this information to himself until there was more certainty.

Shal opened up a notes app on his phone, writing down the interaction he had just a mere moment ago. Who would have thought the lead he had found would walk right to his doorstep.

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One could describe the building of his workplace as suffocating. It can be challenging to find, as its only entrance exists between the alleyways of two buildings. As obsolete as it sounds, it serves a purpose. To deter random small-time thugs from stumbling across the place. Shalnark had built a name for himself under the pseudonym Black Voice. Also known as Meteor Cove's most prolific intel broker.

Who would have thought that after spending all those years investigating and searching for a ghost, those skills became his day job? Actually, he would have guessed it. It was the most logical decision, after all.

Being an intel broker has been intriguing, to say the least. Secretly being involved in many worldwide scandals, usually missing persons cases. The number of times he chuckled when a client brought up familiar names such as Ging Freecss or Pariston Hill. He'd ponder to himself, *"What on earth did those two do to get all of these people involved?"*

Truly, Shalnark enjoyed his job, almost to the point where he could forget about the ghosts that haunted his childhood. Almost.

Today was like every other day; it was dead silent until someone knocked on his door.

"Come in." Shalnark hollered, fixing his tie as his gaze stayed glued to the computer screen.

As the door opened, "Um... Hello," said a young woman. However, based on the footsteps, there was another. Shalnark stood up to see where the other figure was, only to be surprised that he had to look so far down.

Based on the outfit, he'd guess that these two were pirates. The young woman wore a black blouse and a washed-out dark blue tattered skirt. Her leather corset sat nicely around her waist, but what was the most noticeable thing about her outfit. How *obsolete* it was. She was dressed as if she mimicked what a pirate would look like in a children's cartoon. While some pirates around these parts still appreciate the theatrics, it was wild to witness in the modern day.

The man next to her was barely any different. The first thing Shalnark noticed was exceptionally short in stature he was. His messy, long, grayish hair covered most of his face with only a hint of eye popping out. He wore a light blue tunic with gray striped pants. Putting the whole fit together with a brown sash resting on his hips. It was comical how cartoonish these two appear to be.

Sarcastically, Shalnark lightly applauded them before welcoming his new clients, "So, let me guess. You two are pirates?" It was difficult to hide the snark in his voice.

"Yes. We are." The woman blinked, confused about why the man clapped.

"So, what are a couple of pirates doing here?" He shrugged, best not to piss them off, if they were telling the truth.

"We're looking for..." She paused, then turned towards the man. "What was it again?" Shalnark was taken off guard, momentarily. *Did she seriously forget why she came here?*

The man spoke up; his voice was rather airy. "We are looking for the intel broker, Black Voice."

Shalnark smiled, "You are staring right at him."

"Ah, really? You look different than I expected." She tilted her head.

"What did you think I'd look like?" Shal chuckled.

"Umm... More intimidating, I guess." She shrugged.

"Well, you got me there." As he chuckled, his facade never changed. Shal had perfected his cherub-like demeanor, a smile as empty as flowery words. People who could see past it always likened it to something more demonic.

"So, let's cut the small talk. Assuming you have the money, what kind of information are you looking for?" Shalnark sat back down and gestured for the two clients to do the same. Both of them obliged, though the woman seemed to be distracted by her surroundings. One would assume she was simply an airhead, but her gaze suggested something more analytical.

The small man spoke up, assuming to take the lead in the conversation, "We're looking for information on behalf of our captain. We've heard a rumor that the Black Voice is an intel broker that originated in Meteor Cove. Is that true?"

Shalnark usually avoided answering questions about himself for safety; however, that fact was well-known across the city. He nodded, "Yeah, I lived here all my life. Why is that important?"

"The information we seek involves an event that may or may not have happened here, in Meteor Cove."

Shalnark couldn't help but chuckle, "Aren't you being vague? However, you did come to the right person. How long ago was this event?"

"Fifteen years ago."

Shalnark's finger flinched; only for a brief moment did his expression falter. Forcing a smile, his gaze became intrigued by the direction of the conversation. "Fifteen years ago, you say? Hmmm... I recall that time quite well. So, what happened fifteen years ago?"

The man paused, perhaps noticing Shal's previous reaction. Nonetheless, he responded, "We're looking for any information on human or cryptid body collectors that might have been active fifteen years ago."

His heart sank to the bottom of his stomach when he uttered the words cryptid body collectors. The lingering desire was to break out of character, to bring up his long-lost childhood friends. Instead, he clasped his hands together, shifting his elbows onto the desk. Leaning forward, with a gaze so direct, he spoke, "When you say cryptids, are you referring to the myth that surrounds Meteor Cove?"

"Myth?" The woman perked up, blinking a few times.

"It's interesting that you brought up fifteen years ago because there was allegedly an incident involving sirens." Carefully, he watched their reactions. Their body shifted into a tense state. If his theory is correct, this might be his sole opportunity to uncover what happened to Chrollo and the other children.

"Allegedly?" The man repeated, showing signs of distrust towards Shal.

"Well, it's a complicated situation. There's a man who regularly hangs out at The Velvet Vine, a pub near the shore. He has some wild stories, but his most interesting one involves an encounter with sirens fifteen years ago." Internally chuckling, how strange was it to talk about himself in the third person.

"Something about siren kids and something bad happening to one of them. With his track record, he should be at the pub tonight." It was a gambled risk; truthfully, he didn't know if anything bad had happened. However, with the information he gathered from this interaction, it sounded like someone in that friend group had perished. If that were the case, their disappearance made sense.

"Siren kids..." They repeated his words. Looking at each other, as if checking if they were on the same page before responding.

"What's this man's name?" He asked.

"Well, he goes by many names." Not a lie, however, he couldn't shake the feeling that Chrollo was still alive and out there. That if Chrollo was connected to them, he was choosing to avoid him. "However, the best way to describe his appearance is a handsome blonde man. He also has a tendency to wear bright clothes, like lavender or teal."

The pirates both nodded, handing him a wallet filled with jenny, though something told him that his wallet didn't belong to either of them. "Thank you. If we need more information, we'll be back."

Shalnark perked up, still holding back his curiosity. "Hey, if you don't mind me asking, what is the name of your Captain?"

The short man turned around. "Sorry, he forbade us from revealing personal information."

"I see..." Waiting until they had left, Shal leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling.

"This is... really happening... right?"

He thought to himself, "So five siren kids started to hang out on the shores of Meteor Cove. One or more may have been caught by a cryptid collector. If there were any survivors, the rest must have fled back to the sea, which would explain their disappearance. If they are looking for clues, that means they are back for revenge and not..."

He paused, fully knowing how selfish he sounded. Of course, they would prioritize finding the collector over rekindling the old flame between them. However, it still hurt. If Chrollo was still out there, he should have come looking for him.

Shal shook his head. "Enough of those thoughts." He exclaimed to himself. Rising from the chair, he patted his suit. "I should get dressed for my pub date tonight."

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Chapter 4: Chapter 4

It's been ages since Shalnark last disguised himself. Using his own persona as bait, figuratively and literally, for a fish. Or at least, that's how he's humoring himself tonight. Slicking his hair back, much like Phinks, donning sunglasses to hide half of his face. He wore a lavender aloha shirt and teal swimming trunks. All dressed up as a flashier version of himself. Enough to fit the description he had given, but different enough that Chrollo or the others may not recognize him at first glance.

It's been fifteen years, after all.

Admittedly, this was a risky gamble. There was always a chance that even if Chrollo was somehow related to those two pirates, that didn't mean he'd show up. For all Shal knew, perhaps it would be the same two pirates that visited his office. Alternatively, Chrollo could show up with the two pirates, and they could blow his cover. In the worst-case scenario, Chrollo and the other siren kids have nothing to do with those two pirates. Which would mean Shal just wasted his time with a couple of nobodies.

He exhaled, knowing how unusually impulsive he was about the whole situation. This would be something Phinks would do, well, no... Phinks would blow his cover the moment he thought the two pirates were related to Feitan. That man could be a real blabbermouth without someone babysitting him. Shal chuckled fondly over the dumb scenarios Phinks would have gotten himself into.

Had Phinks been committed to giving up on Feitan, he and Shal could have... No, that would have been wishful thinking. Both of them were guilty of being too obsessive over the memory of the ghosts that haunted their childhood. Asking for either of them to forget would have been asking too much. Perhaps that's why none of Shal's relationships ever progressed. Nothing felt right. The romance felt empty, a chore instead of anything meaningful, with Phinks being the only exception.

What he had with Phinks was less romantic and more platonic. There was never any romance between them, but the platonic bond they had made the experience enjoyable, to say the least. There was nothing to regret between them. Their feelings were just too mutual. *"I love you more as a friend than as a partner."*

Shal sighed, taking out his phone to reminisce while scrolling through old texts. Murmuring to himself, "It really would have been simpler with you, wouldn't it?" Ignoring all of the times the doorbell rang, signaling people walking in and out.

He couldn't help but feel sorry for himself. The number of times Franklin advised him to move on made him feel incompetent. Franklin was right, as usual, but the right thing to do felt so wrong. Maybe... Maybe if this lead turns out to be all for nothing... He could actually try this time.

It's been fifteen years. ***Wake up.***

After such a long time of not focusing on his past, he really believed he had almost moved on from it. However, tonight has only proven the opposite. He hung his head low, sighing out loud. Thinking to himself, "When did I get so *pathetic?* What am I even doing here? This is *so* stupid."

Propping his elbow on the counter, resting his head on his hand, he sighed. Debating if he should just drink a glass or two and book it.

"Here you go, sir." The bartender gently slid a glass of rum to Shal's side with a polite smile.

"I didn't order anything?" Shal looked confused. Did she make a mistake?

"I know. A handsome gentleman ordered it for you." She lightly gestured to a man sitting alone at the corner of the pub. Another obnoxiously dressed pirate was casually ignoring his surroundings in a secluded, dim area. The obstacles within his vision were blurry, as the rowdy conversation fizzled out into white noise. It was difficult to get a clear picture of his face, but the black fur trim on his coat popped out like a sore thumb.

Shal turned his attention to the bartender. "How do you know he meant this glass for me? What did he say?"

She tilted her head with a smile, "Hmm... He said to order this for the handsome blonde man in the lavender and teal."

Well, that does it, doesn't it. Shalnark nodded and slowly drank half of the rum in the glass. With a deep breath, he finally rose from the stool and walked to this pirate. If it weren't for his sunglasses, he would have caught on.

Shalnark could only imagine the flicker of recognition painting his eyes. The way how his mid-length, comma hair bangs shadowed over the black abyss in his eyes. Chrollo could only be described as a handsome young kid, but to grow up like this was ridiculous. It was as if the tattoo on his forehead and the large earrings were meant to make his appearance less friendly. Despite the obvious attempts to visually appear threatening, a hidden sense of politeness surrounded him.

"Thanks for the drink. Usually, people flirt with me first before spending a single jenny on me." Shal said, sitting down across from him. "So, why did you order me a drink?" Purposely, Shal forced his voice to sound deeper, anything that would help his cover.

Chrollo faced Shalnark, gave a polite smile, and spoke as if he were half talking to himself, "I heard you had interesting stories. Can't recall who told me that... If you don't mind, I thought it would be nice if tonight, you could accompany me with them."

What a liar. Not that Shal could complain much.

"Huh, really? People sure do like to talk. Which story were you interested in? I got loads of them." Taking a small sip of rum, carefully watching him through his shaded lens.

"I've always been fascinated with sea creatures. Rumors of the great megalodon still lurking around these parts. Or something smaller, like sirens."

"Well, I never met a megalodon, but sirens... That's a different story." He chuckled; this was painful.

"Hmmm, really? Are sirens a common occurrence here?"

"No, they aren't. Most people here don't believe in them, in fact. I wouldn't have either had it not been that event, fifteen years ago." *Painful.* This was so frustrating. Not that Shalnark showed any of his deeper emotions with his delivery.

Chrollo's eyes rose for a mere fraction before lowering, "Fifteen years ago, you say? Were you a child back then? I'm sorry, but I couldn't help but notice how young you look." Despite the polite facade, the hint of unease lingered in the air.

Silence... Utter silence.

Shalnark sighed, having had enough of this bullshit performance. He began to mess up his slicked-back hair, styling it to his preferred look. "You should have noticed more, Chrollo." Shalnark dropped his fake deep voice and removed his sunglasses. "So, who died fifteen years ago?"

Momentarily, his eyes widened only to close while shaking his head, "Of course, this was too good to be true." Words that stung, as he implied meeting Shalnark was a disappointing outcome.

"Wow, after all these years, that's how you're going to greet an old friend?" Sarcastically smiling through all of the suppressed emotions. "I'm totally heartbroken."

Chrollo averted his gaze towards the glass.

"Chrollo, who died?" Shalnark repeated himself.

"What makes you think someone died?" Chrollo murmured.

"Your new friends gave enough context clues. I'm not an idiot. You guys suddenly disappeared, and the moment you came back, you were looking for cryptid collectors? Instead of, oh, I don't know, reuniting with your childhood friends?"

A chuckle of disbelief slipped through Chrollo's mouth. "You're... the Black Voice of Meteor Cove..." Shaking his head, recognizing the situation was set up from the beginning.

"If you're not going to tell me who died, can you at least confirm that it's not Feitan? Phinks can't go through any more heartbreaks."

"I can't confirm anything, Shal."

Suddenly, Shalnark's phone began to ring.

"You should answer that." Chrollo gestured.

"And take my eyes off of you? Why can't you confirm anything?" Without removing his stare, he slowly took out his phone. Who the hell would be calling him up so late?

"It's been fifteen years, Shal. People change, both humans and sirens alike."

Shalnark placed his phone on the table. The screen lit up with the caller ID labeled as Phinks. Words remained unspoken as the ringing petered out.

Shortly after, the desperate pings of text flooded the screen.

Phinks: Shal, this is an emergency!
Phinks: Either pick up or show up at my place.
Phinks: I know you still have the spare key.
Phinks: I found Fei.
Phinks: He's unwell and badly injured!

Glancing over to the texts, Shal was surprised, relieved that Feitan was not one of the kids who perished all those years ago. His gaze shifted to Chrollo, who looked mortified by the texts.

"Is this... another one of your setups, Shal?" He finally dropped that mask. A suffocating aura of cold, unrestrained rage filled the abyss that was the darkness in his eyes. To think he could ever look that way towards Shalnark is absolutely heartbreaking.

Suppressing his somber mood, Shalnark shook his head. "I would never drag Phinks into one of my setups." Shal picked up the phone, obscuring the screen from Chrollo's vision. Shal's demeanor faltered. "Phinks wouldn't text me unless the injury was that severe. Feitan must be in a real fucked up state... huh?"

Chrollo's glare only grew sharper. "Where does Phinks live?"

Ignoring his question, "You know, Chrollo. I could forgive you for abandoning me all those years ago if my theory about one of our siren friends perishing is what got you kids fleeing into the ocean. However, I'm having a hard time trusting you now."

"Shal..."

"Whether you like it or not, you're now back in my life. People do change, but I loved you for fifteen years. Phinks loved Feitan just as long, albeit in a far more healthier way than me. However, if you're just here to abandon me again, my love can turn into hate. And I can promise you, the moment I don't care about a person, they become nothing but a toy to me. Something I could break if I feel like it." Never had Shalnark so openly threatened a person.

It was difficult, analyzing the array of emotions Chrollo was trying to suppress. He probably never expected Shalnark to be so blunt about it. Clasping his hands, allowing his forehead to rest on top of it, "Shal... What do you want from me?"

"Who perished fifteen years ago?" So certain of his theory, he didn't even entertain another alternative.

"...Sarasa."

"Are you looking for her killer?" He wondered if Sheila knew anything, seeing how her breakdown was far more dramatic than the other kids. Perhaps if she did, then the way she fell apart was only natural for a child.

"Yes."

Shalnark exhaled; this was the closure he needed. "I only want two things. One, let me help you find her killer. Two, stay in contact with me afterward."

...

"You should have forgotten about me all those years ago, Shal."

"*Love* is this stupid thing that humans have to suffer with. Not sure if sirens have that capability."

The two remain silent. Shal started texting Phinks back, realizing how worried he must have been. It's unusual for him to be so radio-silent.

"I'll drop a hint that I'm bringing another person, but first I have to congratulate him on finding his long-lost boyfriend."

"You're still teasing him like that?"

"You bet."

End Notes

Hello o/ AO3 writer here! I'm reuploading the fic here, you know, just in case. Not sure what the community here is like, but I hope someone here enjoys this. Y'all take care.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!