

Chapter 28: Of Monsters and Skeletons

Several days passed as the crew started to settle into the *Everlasting Resolve*, the ship plowing through the waves of the Grand Line in a way that none of them had experienced before. The ship's ability to ignore wind and even waves to a certain degree whenever Luffy or the secondary coal engine powered it was astonishing to Nami in particular. She didn't like how enclosed and away from the feel of the wind she was in the bridge with the windows closed, but that was a minor consideration.

During that time, Chopper settled into his new quarters with delight. Similarly, Makino and the others gave a great thumbs-up to the new showers and bathing rooms, and Robin and Luffy got used to their own room.

In fact, getting used to it was too mild. Luffy and Robin completely loved the captain's quarters for several reasons. One, the bed was big enough that they didn't thump one another as they tossed and turned. This concern, which Robin had broached the first night they had slept in the same bed, had proven to indeed be an issue. Although not in the way she had feared. In the end, it wasn't Luffy who took the hits, but Robin who found herself facing a sudden visit to the floor one night as they slept aboard the *Resolve* back on Water 7 the day after Aqua Laguna.

Flashback:

The sensation of being in the air woke Robin up, and she looked around wildly before she hit the deck by the side of the bed, although the sensation hadn't been as painful as it should have been. Shaking her head, Robin blinked away the remaining cobwebs from sleep, feeling the sheet around her, having pulled it after her as she moved through the air and off the bed.

The sound of Robin hitting the deck and the sensation of having the covers pulled off him woke Luffy up, and he blinked in the darkness of the room, looking around, then back to where Robin was sitting upright on the ground. "I thought you were on my other side," he muttered, his mind still hazy from sleep.

Robin glared at him, gently wiggling her wrist. It was only then that Luffy realized that he was holding that wrist. "I **was** on that side until you suddenly decided to perform some kind of judo throw on me."

"Huh." Luffy blinked again, then pushed himself further away from her to the edge that Robin had previously been closest to. "You must have been about to hit me or something. I did tell you about my sleep-fu, remember? Thanks to living with bandits most of my life and the fact that my grandfather always liked attacking us when we were asleep when he visited, I developed sleep-fu to protect myself."

Robin blinked and was about to fire back but given her own tendency to thrash about in her sleep – she had a lot of bad memories after all – Robin might have indeed gone to punch him, are something. *Nor can I disparage the idea of him throwing me accidentally. Luffy did warn me, after all.*

"I suppose I should be grateful that I didn't go for a kick then." Rolling her eyes, Robin laid down on the new side of the bed, somewhat amused to note that the spot Luffy previously occupied was far warmer than where she had been lying, tossing the blanket over the both of them. *I wonder if Luffy just runs that hot, or if that is due to his lightning powers?* "Let us hope that such an event does not occur. I would rather not have to get used to sleeping on my own again."

End flashback

Since that night, the two of them occasionally spent several minutes cuddling before moving away from one another. Occasionally one or the other would come close anyway, but with their horrible sleeping habits, it more often than not ended with them both waking up, apologizing and moving back to the normal positions. Afterward, Robin always insisted on taking the spot on the bed Luffy had inhabited a moment ago.

For his part, Luffy hoped that eventually, his sleep-fu would learn to recognize Robin as a friendly. Once that happened, any move she made would probably be countered by just pulling her closer. Probably. Sleep-fu wasn't exactly a science, after all.

Another bonus to the room was the second-story library set right above the bed. Robin was a bit of a night owl when she had enough energy left. The loft library kept the light of her lamp away from the bed, and Robin could sit up there for hours without bothering Luffy's sleep at all.

The crew also appreciated the captain's quarters. The sound dampening system that Franky had put into the walls worked, as the crew heard nothing the first three nights they were at sea as Luffy and Robin christened the room, making love through most of both the first two nights. Although they were interrupted on the third by Makino, who was on watch that night with Sanji and decided he needed Luffy to use his powers to get them out from under a dangerous-looking storm.

Luffy would long remember the sight of Sanji, who Makino sent to get Luffy when they didn't reply to the intercom. Sanji had cried tears of blood as he pounded on their door to get their attention. "Damn you, you shitty captain, stop m, m, ma, touching Robin, and get out here!" After which, the cook had broken down entirely for a few minutes.

And speaking of the cook, when Luffy asked on the fifth day out from Water 7 if any of the crew wanted to ask Franky to change anything, Sanji was one of the few who did, beyond the fact that the intercom in the captain's quarters didn't work so well, the sound tinny and soft.

The crew met inside the main sitting area/dining room, with Makino listening in from on high where she was at the wheel once more. The weather outside was extremely unpleasant right now. A cold front had moved in from nowhere, so much so that there was frost on the windows, and occasionally they could actually hear little ice floes smashing into the side of the ship.

"I like the setup in the actual kitchen, I tested all of the equipment by this point. But I would like to be able to get down into the hold and bring up supplies faster. Two of the freezers down there are also awkwardly placed, so you can't open both of their doors at once."

Franky frowned a bit, thinking. "That second bit is easy enough to fix. With the freezers being dial-based, they're easy to move around. But getting supplies up faster... Do you mean you want some kind of small elevator thing? Like they have in hotels to send meals up?"

"No, because then someone would have to be down in the hold to pass them along. That's possible, but it isn't something I'd want to make a habit of assuming," Sanji shrugged. "It isn't that big a deal, Franky. If we could install another fridge up here, so I could keep more food up here, that would be best."

“In that case, that’s suuuper easy to fix!” Franky said, giving the cook a thumbs up. “Anything that helps keep your food flowing is a great idea in my mind.”

“Hear, hear,” most of the rest of the crew intoned, giving Sanji a thumbs up. The only one who didn’t was Zoro, who simply grumbled a bit.

Zoro and Luffy had some observations, but they weren’t real complaints, simply acknowledging compromises that the ship had to make. The use of the gun deck as a training area, for example, didn’t quite work as well as they could’ve hoped since the dial-based guns took up so much space and couldn’t be moved. Likewise, there wasn’t a lot of space aboard the main deck, with the guns and the ship’s boat in the way. Another issue had shown up when they had tested out the secondary engines, the coal engine. The smokestack worked, taking the smoke up and out from the top of the conning tower/mast. But, as it did, the smoke obscured their flag,

“But that’s nothing to do with the ship’s design, Franky. It’s just we still need more space for some of our training, specifically our long-range attacks.”

“Although I will ask,” Luffy went on, pointing out the door towards the ship’s prow and forwardmost gun turret. “Have you and Nami decided what you’re going to be doing with that second weapons pod?”

“The proper term is the turret, but yeah, Nami and I have been talking about that the past few days. Figuring out how to do what we want is something Laki and I need to work on.”

“What we want to do is to build a kind of limited weather control device,” Laki said, nodding over to Nami, who gave her a thumbs up. “Something our navigator there could use to manipulate the weather. For example, if there are clouds in the sky, she could add to them and bring down rain or fog. That kind of thing.”

“We know how to use each of the dials we want to have as part of this separately, but using them altogether, it’s going to be a little more difficult.” Franky opined.

“Even so, Franky,” Luffy said, stretching in place and hopping to his feet. “You made a magnificent ship here. Don’t you think so, Eve?”

The ship’s Klabautermann thrust out a hand from one wall, giving the crew a thumbs up, which was more than she had been able to do up to this point. Transferring ships had a really, really strained the Klabautermann. Ever since the crew had gone out of their way to include Eve in their conversations or ask if she wanted something to eat, or, in Robin and Luffy’s case, politely tell her that she should remove her consciousness from the captain’s quarters. Sanji prepared an extra plate at every meal, but only in the last day had those meals begin to disappear.

“I love it, Franky. I just wish we had a chance to check out the main guns! I’m really looking forward to that.” Everyone laughed, and the topic turned to other things as Luffy and his latest victim, that is, training partner headed down into the gun deck.

After the cold wave had passed, the ship ran into a monstrous storm, which seemed to shift almost at a whim from an angry deity between lightning and thunder to snow and then hail, and even, for some odd reason, a hail of sardines, complete with a few cans falling hard enough to leave bruises

on most of the crew. With Luffy in the engine room and the others either in the conning tower or out on the deck keeping clear of snow or sardines, it made for an extremely unpleasant day and an even worse night.

However, the next day, it seemed as if the Grand Line had given them a reprieve. When they all met up for breakfast or dinner for Robin and Chopper, who had been on duty last night, Nami smiled happily as she went around, opening the windows to the kitchen/dining room area. "It's going to be a lovely day today!"

"All day? How can you be so sure?" Frank asked, shaking his head. He had come to recognize Nami was a once-in-a-generation navigator, but this entered the realm of magic.

He flinched back as Nami turned to them, her eyes blazing. "It's going to be fine for the rest of the morning. That is good enough for me, after the weather we've been having! And if you bring on even worse weather by tempting fate, I'll kill you!" She made a slashing motion with one finger over her neck for emphasis.

"That's great news, Luffy said with a grin. "As much as I think it's awesome that we can use my lightning powers to power the ship, I haven't actually been outside myself in the last two days either. We'll switch to sailing power for the rest of the day then." He looked over to Sanji. "I think you and I will take our training outside and into the air."

Later on, Luffy had reason to regret his decision. As he was sparring with Sanji, and Zoro was at the prow of the ship, practicing his long-distance attacks - what he could do of them with only two swords - the rest of the crew, Franky excluded, were out on the deck doing calisthenics. And all of the girls had decided it was a day for spandex. More than once, Luffy had got through Sanji's defenses simply because he was too busy ogling the girls below them. Even Luffy's self-control had been frayed badly by the sight of Robin, Nami and Laki going through calisthenics exercises in skintight exercise clothing. While watching Chopper doing calisthenics was just hilarious, given his large form.

However, Luffy tore himself away from the site below and the fight with Sanji as he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. *Is that a ship?*

Looking in that direction now, Luffy held a hand to halt Sanji, not that he needed to. The cook had once again gone into Lala land as he stared down at the deck. On foot thumping the air, while hearts appeared in his eyes.

Ignoring that, Luffy held a hand up above his eyes to block the glare of the sun as he peered at the distant mound on the horizon. *No, that isn't a ship...* "Land ho!" He bellowed at the top of his lungs.

The others all looked up at him in confusion. Nami cupped her hands around her mouth, shouting, "Are we getting close to where the log pose is pointing?"

"No, it's off to the side of our course. Franky, sixty degrees to port. Use the alternate engine if you have to."

The crew began to scamper in different directions, Nami making for the conning tower and the ladder leading up to the crow's nest, while Makino made to take over the wheel from Franky, who

moved over to the controls for the engine and Laki and Chopper headed inside to change and prepare the guns.

In the crow's nest, Nami picked up the spyglass there and peered through it as Luffy sat in one of the crow's nest's windows, pointing the direction out to her, trying to keep his eyes away from the orange-haired navigator. *God, is she curvy! No, stop thinking that, you have a girlfriend already, Luffy. You can't go ogling other girls! Especially not Nami, given what happened between the two of you.*

Eventually, Luffy was able to tear his eyes away, but not before Nami noticed him looking and smirked, just slightly. While that ship had sailed, it fed her feminine ego to know that Luffy couldn't help himself from looking. "It's an island all right, a tropical one from the trees I can see."

"Do you think that's why we're having such good weather?"

Nami bit her lip, staring at the island again, then closing the spyglass. "I don't know. The good weather started pretty far out if so. Normally an island's weather range is dependent on the island's size. So it could be an extra-large island, but I don't know. Something about that doesn't feel right."

"Regardless, you and the others better go change your clothing," Luffy said, now looking Nami in the eyes. "Unless ya think that clothing'll take the punishment of going through a jungle?"

Nami nodded, although she couldn't quite stop herself from shaking her rear at Luffy as she moved over to the ladder leading down. But Luffy had already turned away, hopping back down towards the main deck to report to the others, passing orders to Robin to take Nami's place in the crow's nest. There, he took a moment to appreciate the site of Robin still wearing her own Spandex outfit, and Robin preened under his eyes, slightly rounding her shoulders to further accentuate her bust.

To one side, Laki noticed this, then stared down at her own far more modest chest, shaking her head with a rueful expression on her face. Sanji had also noticed this little byplay and was biting at a napkin, muttering about how his captain was so shitty.

Yet really, Sanji had nothing to complain about. Luffy and Robin's relationship had come out into the open several weeks back by this point, and neither of them had done anything overt. Or at least, nothing he knew about.

About an hour later, the ship was close enough to the island that Luffy ordered them to start circling it, wanting to know the lay of the land before they went ashore. Nami was grateful for this as it allowed her to start on her map of the island quickly. But as they went, it became clear that the island wasn't nearly large enough to have allowed them to enter its climate zone as early as they had that morning. It wasn't small by any means, but it wasn't big enough for that, being about a fourth of the size of Water 7 by the navigator's estimate.

"It's a concave island, no major landmasses to speak of, but it's got one big hill to it," Nami explained, moving one hand in the air as if to indicate the top of the hill. "We haven't seen anything to indicate that people are living there, except for that."

Now Nami pointed out the window, indicating where a small boat had been pulled up onto the shore, its bottom stove in by something. Seeing that, Luffy had ordered the ship closer in towards the island. And there, they found another strange thing. With most islands, you would run into a gradual

upswell of land underneath the water as you moved towards the island. Here, it looked as if the island's sides ended in a cliff because the *Everlasting Resolve*, which was a medium-sized vessel now, was able to come very close to the shoreline before dropping anchor.

"Still, a lot of those trees looked to be pineapple or other kinds of tropical trees, so we can at least fill our hold with as much fruit is in store. I've also seen a lot of birds, so we can maybe fill up the meat locker too," Nami reported nodding over to Sanji, who bowed from the waist grandly towards her, declaring how happy he was for her attention to details like that.

But when he looked at the island, Luffy thought about other things than the food. "Well, regardless of the mystery about how this island is creating such a large area of control, this place might be a good spot for some training."

"Everything is training with you, isn't it," Franky said. Shaking his head.

"You have no idea," the rest of the crew declared as one causing Luffy to laugh.

Nami had a problem to raise. "This island isn't on our route," she said, holding up one of the two Log Poses the crew had. The other one was in its stand in front of the wheel on the bridge. The needle was now visibly turning away from a straight-on course, instead pointing north northeast. "We have no idea how long we can stay here without it resetting and changing our route going forward."

"True, but considering we have no control over our route going forward anyway, I don't see that is a big deal," Luffy opined. "We'll explore the island, and then see..."

"Sail Ho!" Came Robin's shout through the intercom system, interrupting Luffy. "One large ship, coming around the island, it must have come in from another angle. It's flying what looks like a pirate flag."

Luffy looked at the others, then he shrugged. "Pull up the anchor, Chopper. Let's get back out to sea and then see what this ship is going to do. I don't want us stuck in one place when they come close."

"Roger," Chopper replied, hopping to his feet. But by the time he got to the controls for the crank that would pull up the ship's two anchors, Eve had already worked them, pulling up the anchors quickly.

Working under Luffy's power, the ship turned away from the beach, getting some distance shore before moving to intercept the other pirate ship.

Zoro stood on the prow. With his captain down in the engine room, it fell to the first made to address the upcoming pirate ship. Although, if the other pirate ship captain demanded to speak captain-to-captain, he would have to go and get Luffy. There were certain protocols to be obeyed when one pirate ship met another. At least, when they did so, and it didn't immediately devolve into a fight.

"Ahoy! We are the Straw Hat Pirates, and we're not interested in a fight! We just want to use this island as a stopover for a while," he shouted through a tube, then frowned as he began to hear something on the wind. "Is that music?"

The enemy ship didn't reply to his bellow, but it didn't fire at them either, so Zoro stopped his shouting, waiting until they were within comfortable hailing distance. But a few moments later, as the

other ship moved closer, the sound of music became clearer, becoming louder and louder as the ship came closer.

Using her spyglass, Robin could tell that was because the ship had what looked like an orchestra set up at the aft of the ship, with a large series of trumpets along the prow. Several other similar trumpets, although smaller, lined the ship at intervals along its length. The ship itself was painted in green and purple colors and otherwise didn't look all that different from a second-line marine galleon with the same number of guns and general build, but with a far larger crew given it was still moving and the large choir at the aft.

Robin dutifully reported all this to the two in the bridge, then added her own slant to things. "So that entire ship looks as if it is designed to use music in some fashion. Not the oddest idea I've seen on the Grand Line, but still quite strange. I wonder what the music is supposed to be doing? I once read a story where a certain sound could make people void their bowels. If this the same kind of thing, it would certainly be an advantage if they could then close in, to destroy us with cannons as we are too busy voiding ourselves all over the place."

"God, stop saying things like that, Robin!" Nami answered from the bridge, shaking her head at the gross image that Robin's words had evoked.

Chopper, Laki and Makino were out on the deck, with Sanji and Nami in the bridge, Robin up in the crow's nest, and Luffy down in the engine room. Makino was standing near Chopper and blinked, looking at him in some surprise as he began to twitch this way and that, moving his body backward, then forwards. "Do you have ants in your pants Doctor," she teased. "I would've thought you would be over feeling anxious at the thought of a fight."

"It, it's not me. I don't know why I'm moving like this!" Chopper stammered before suddenly twirling and throwing a punch in Makino's direction. Since he was in his small form, Makino could simply step back out of Chopper's range easily, then place a hand on the top of Chopper's hat, keeping him still.

"I didn't mean to do that!" Chopper shouted, even as he moved to try to attack her again, twirling out from under Makino's hold on his head and darting in.

Makino leaped up over his head, her long skirt flapping in the breeze behind her for a moment, as she frowned down at him. "What do you mean it's not you?"

A smashing sound from one side distracted her, but she could still dodge a blow from Chopper's little hoof even as she looked in the direction the crash had come from. Franky had just tried to attack Laki, and unlike Makino, Laki hadn't dodged in time. Franky's large fist had smashed into her side, hurling her into a few of Nami's trees, which had not been pulled into their protective hold just yet.

"What the hell, Franky!" Laki groaned, pushing herself out from the trees angrily.

"Sorry, girly, I didn't mean to do that! Someone is using that music to control me!" Franky groaned, even as he darted forward, lashing out with a punch towards her head.

Laki quickly dodged, then flipped herself up and into Franky's guard, lashing out with a kick towards his chin. There was a clang as the cyborg stumbled back, and Laki grunted even as she

retreated, leaning down to activate her Dial skates. "Right, forgot, cyborg. That's going to leave a bruise."

Zoro also felt something trying to control him as his limbs began to move under their own power. He glared at them, trying to control his hands as they moved towards his swords. "It's some kind of mind control! The longer we listen, the more of us are going to fall under its spell!"

"When this was reported to Luffy by Nami, Luffy scowled angrily. "Sanji, and subdue Franky and Chopper, and if you have to, Zoro too. Get Laki into the turret for the railgun. I think we're going to have a chance to try it out. I don't like the idea of someone trying to use mind control of my crew, and the idea of using them for target practice makes me smile."

Even as he continued to attack Laki, Franky heard this coming through the intercom system and grinned. "Super!" But then he turned to the side, his hand darting out. Unwilling to use her rifle on the big guy, she attempted to go for a chokehold, only to be grabbed out of the air by one of his big hands and hurled the length of the ship.

Just then, Sanji leaped down, and a kick caught the back of Franky's head, hurling him face-first into the side of the conning tower, where he slid down, groaning. "Did you have to kick me in the back of the head!"

"Yes, you cretin! You were attacking Laki-chwan! How dare you attack a woman in my presence, you robot-wannabe!? I'll pound you into the deck!"

"Oy love cook, you better move," Zoro's words came, almost lazily, uncaringly.

Yet Sanji still turned in his direction and was able to block the slash coming at him. "What the hell, if you're being mind-controlled, sound worried about it, damn it!"

"What, an attack as weak as that a threat to you? I'm so sorry," Zoro continued in the same dull tone as if he couldn't be bothered to care, which was precisely the point.

"I'm going to make a salad out of you, shitty Marimo!" Sanji shouted, lashing out with a kick which Zoro blocked, and the two began to fight.

However, Laki had used this distraction to get past Franky and the others, pulling out the hatch door to the turret and getting into it quickly.

Inside, the turret was a simple affair, having a set of controls that could turn the turret this way and that, elevated, and then another one that would launch the railgun around for bringing up another cannonball from a pulley system that Franky had devised. Laki did this now as she twisted the current around, pointing the gun towards the enemy ship.

Aboard the enemy ship, the pirate crew's first mate, a large, tanned man with hair color almost the same color as Nami's stood. He had a long beard of the same color, wore a jacket and vest combo, and had fur-lined gauntlets on his hand, which ended in small claws. "Captain Bayan, someone over there is still under their own control!" Turning, he shouted orders. "Move the ship, keep us moving around them to the back. That gun won't be able to range on us there."

The pirate's captain, a much thinner but equally tall man with long blue hair done in a somewhat effete manner, was also the orchestra leader, and he shook his head from where he was directing his crew in the song. He couldn't see the other pirate ship from where he was, but he remembered seeing the gun turret set next to its single, albeit large, mast. "What kind of crappy little cannon is that anyway?" He scoffed in disdain. "It looks at least half a size too small to be a real cannon."

However, the enemy ship had no idea what was coming. In the engine room, Luffy deferred some of his energy powering the railgun. He watched as a small meter filled up to one side of him, showing that the railgun was close to halfway charged after a few seconds. "Laki, you can fire when ready." *I really don't think we'll need a full-power shot here after all.*

Above him in the railgun turret, Laki could almost feel the electricity all around her, a thrumming sound coupled with a slight humming noise. But that was the only sign of the gun powering up, which showed that her and Franky's gun design was working so far. "But the proof is in the pudding, as my little friend Aisa would have put it."

It took only a few seconds to line up the other ship, which was now moving slowly past the seemingly beleaguered *Everlasting Resolve*, heading towards its aft. But not fast enough. Laki got it into the crosshair of her scope and then murmured, "Firing."

The thrumming sound increased instantly, then was followed by a sound like parchment tearing to the sound of lightning, a combination of sounds that none of them had ever heard before. "FZZZAARRRK!!!"

One moment, Byron and the other pirates were confident that the music was doing its job, that the enemy pirate crew had no idea of how to combat the aural assault that was controlling most of their members now, too many members for them to fight their ship effectively. The next moment, their ship heaved, there was a sound of splintering timbers so loud it filled the world, and their entire ship came apart halfway down its length. So tremendous was the impact that everyone aboard was flung off their feet, into the air, or out over the ocean.

Staring through the spyglass at her work, Laki stared in shock, shaking her head. The enemy pirate ship folded almost like a book being closed. Both sides instantly began to sink, even as the people aboard were questioning what the hell it just happened. "By my ancestors!"

A cackle echoed throughout the ship as Eve's response to the destruction one of her guns had created made itself known. "Oh hell yes! BOOOM, baby, boom!!! This is one frigate that ain't ever going to need to run from the big boys ever again!"

It hadn't quite sunk into Eve's psyche that her new ship-self was a bit too large to be called a frigate anymore.

With the music stopped and Eve's cackling all around them, Franky and Chopper's attempts to assault Sanji ceased, although Zoro took a moment to do the same, something Sanji noted. "You bastard! Were you even under their control?!"

"Of course I was, Aho Cook! If I wasn't, I would've been going all out and using my techniques instead of just attacking you wildly," Zoro huffed, annoyed at the implications. He hadn't minded

attacking Sanji as he had been, but for the other man to assume that such an attack was under his own power was insulting.

After a second, their conversation ended as they moved to the side of the ship to stare at the damage the railgun had done to the enemy vessel. Zoro was looking at the impact point, shaking his head in astonishment. The cannonball, barely half the size of a normal one, had hit the side of the ship with so much force that it had shattered not only the area directly under the impact zone but blasted all the way through the ship without slowing down. From one side of the ship to the other, you could see cracks in the wood of the outer hull, large and small, almost like fissures in the side of the ship. And judging by the damage done to the rest of the ship, that damage continued inside, shattering the ship from one side to the other.

“Well, I suppose we can call that a successful test,” he murmured as the screams of the wounded and drowning pirates slowly reached him. There was a sound of crackling lightning and not even turning around, Sanji addressed his captain, flicking out a cigarette and lighting the end of it. “What should we do, Captain?”

Luffy stared at the wreckage of the ship, shaking his head slowly from side to side. “Damn, that’s even stronger than one of the ones I was using during the fight against the Buster call!”

“The electro-magnetization shot adds impetus the longer the barrel is,” Franky opined.

Behind them, Laki pulled herself out of the turret, patting Chopper on the head as he apologized profusely to Makino for having attacked her. It wasn’t as if he’d actually landed a punch after all, and the song couldn’t force him to change into any of his other forms. “That was amazing! Did you guys try to track the shot after it blasted through the other ship?”

“I did,” Robin said, dropping down to them, a long hand-rope disappearing behind her as she landed on the main deck, staring down dispassionately at the struggling Pirates. “I tracked it to nearly over the horizon before it started to lose altitude. The shot didn’t even slow down going through the ship.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t cut through like a knife through butter. It hammered through like a nail going a thousand miles,” Luffy said, shaking his head. “That gun is too powerful to use except for full-scale battles. A single enemy ship, no matter how big, isn’t going to be worth that kind of overpowered response.”

“Hmm, we would need to be aware of what is behind the target, at least,” Robin added noncommittally. “But I think that still means we will find enemy ships or even single targets out there worth that kind of response.”

Luffy grunted, staring out at the wreckage of the former enemy pirate ship. In another lifetime, Luffy might well have moved forward to help the enemy pirates get to their ships. He certainly would’ve done that if you had been fighting Marines. But Marines, when all was said and done, were mostly just following orders. Pirates were where they were by choice, and he loathed the very idea of mind control. *I am very damn glad that I was in the engine room!*

As everyone around him murmured agreement to the statement about how the railgun was overpowered, the enemy pirates made for shore. Some of them tried to swim for it, and two of the

enemy ship's boats had survived, and a group of around fifteen were making for the shore, including one character that looked heavily tanned and muscled.

"Sanji, Laki, go after them. Finish them off for us," Luffy ordered, and the two so named rose into the air. "Let's shift the ship back to where we spotted that dinghy first and then will drop anchor again. Eve, you'll be in charge of watching the ship. The rest of us will go ashore to see what there is to see."

Everyone nodded, and soon the ship was moving back towards its former position under sail power this time, at which point they again dropped anchor, and the crew came ashore. As they did, Luffy closed his eyes, concentrating on Kenbunshoku. He hadn't taken much time yet to really put what his Gramps had said about it into practice, but he did so now and instantly began to frown. "That's weird."

"What is it, Captain!?" Robin asked, adding a certain little to 'captain', which caused Luffy to grin.

"We're not the first people on this island. There are five other people here. Two people our own age or a little older, and three kids."

At the mention of kids, everyone stopped moving towards the forest's edge to stare at Luffy. "Kids?" Robin asked curiously.

"Yep. They're hiding over there, two of them anyway." Luffy pointed to a downed log at the edge of the forest.

"Oh, crud!" A voice shouted out from behind that Log, followed by another voice, this one a female voice, going, "you idiot, before you spoke up, we could have snuck away."

While the other pirates rolled their eyes or just sent deadpan looks in the voice's direction, Chopper had other priorities.

"Excuse me! Are you any of you injured, are you shipwrecked?" Chopper shouted.

This brought one of the little kids that Luffy had sensed out of his own hiding place. "The little raccoon talked!"

"I'm not a raccoon! I'm a reindeer! Why can't anyone see my horns!?" Chopper shouted back, staring at the little boy, who was barely about half of Chopper's own size untransformed.

As they all watched, a little girl hopped out of the same hiding place the boy had been hiding in, grabbing his arm in trying to pull them back into hiding. "Darn it, Holy! You can't just leap out of hiding like that."

Two people scrambled out of the original cover that Luffy had pointed out, putting themselves between the kids hiding place, a single knife held upright in the man's hands. He was tallish, thin, with little to no muscle on him, and a short-cut Afro and tinted glasses. To Luffy, he looked like a beatnik from the American 70s except for his clothing. "D, don't come any closer!"

Next to him was a woman in a very odd kind of sheep-like hairstyle, a spaghetti strap blouse, and short pants.

She was kind of cute, Luffy reflected, but her face was set into a scowl, and she had her fists up in front of her. "We won't hand them over! We'll willingly share the treasure, but we won't hand the kids over to you or Bayan! They've been through enough."

Makino moved forward, idly picking the knife out of the man's hand with two fingers before pushing past the two adults like they weren't there to kneel down in front of the little girl and the boy. "And what's your name?" She asked kindly.

The boy smiled at her, waving what looked like a little toy in his hand. "I'm Holy, and this is my sister Milia."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Sir." Makino held out her hand, and the boy shook it with a giggle at being called 'Sir'.

Despite having disarmed the man, Makino's actions had taken some of the worry and concern from the two adults. But then Nami was suddenly in their face, grabbing both of their shoulders. "I'm sorry, what was that about treasure?" She demanded.

Her eyes had changed into Beli signs which shined so brightly both of them tried to flinch away but couldn't escape the orange-haired woman's grip. "Gah, so bright, u, um, wee..." The man stammered as the girl seemed a little too scared to talk.

Suddenly, the third kid that Luffy had sensed earlier appeared, dropping down from a tree. Watching that, Robin nodded in appreciation. The girl showed pretty good survival instincts, staying hidden until things had calmed down. Robin even approved of the look of wariness in the girl's eyes even as her two younger siblings talked to Makino, completely taken in by the older woman's motherly attitude.

"Makino's got the big sister aura, doesn't she?" Luffy murmured beside Robin, also looking at the newcomer. "But that one doesn't seem to be as affected."

Robin nodded, and the two of them watched as the girl, older than the other two by three or more years, Robin estimated, looked at Nami. "There is a treasure. It's somewhere on this island. We've been digging for it into the side of the mound, but we haven't found it yet. If all of you wants to join in, then maybe we'll take you in for a bit of it."

The way she glanced toward their ship and the way she didn't smile as she said this seemed to ring warning signs in Nami's brain, and her entire attitude changed instantly. She dropped the two adults, who she had subconsciously lifted an inch off the ground without even noticing. Both of them stumbled away, and Nami moved over to the girl, leaning down into her face. "Darling, I am a consummate liar, a thief and a pirate. I can tell when someone is trying to lie to me. Just know that if you try to cheat us out of whatever is here, I'll..."

Luffy put a hand on the back of Nami's head, shaking it from side to side. "Nami, tone back the greed, would you? We're not here for treasure."

"Bite your tongue!" Nami growled, turning and swatting Luffy's hand away. A second later, Robin's hand took its place, conjured from her shoulder to pat her head. She scowled at the other

woman, one eyebrow twitching, while the rest of the crew snickered, and the two younger kids also giggled a bit.

“Were not here for treasure,” Luffy repeated, even as he watched Nami try to bite at Robin’s hand. *Who knew that patting the girl on the head would get her so angry? Or maybe it’s the audience and the moment? I’ll try patting her on the head during training to see if that has a reaction later.* “We’re just here to use the island for a bit of training.”

“Training?” The older of the two girls asked, frowning.

Luffy opened his mouth, then looked at the girl and around the others. “We only know the little guy’s name and the little lass’s. What’re your names? I’m Luffy, and this is my crew.”

“Bonney, Maccus and Amanda,” Amanda, though wary, admitted, pointing Bonney and Maccus out before herself. It looked as if she was the leader of this group despite her age. That was somewhat funny to Luffy, although he could see that Robin and Nami both approved of her attitude. And it was true that the two adults hadn’t impressed Luffy, so he was happy that someone seemed to have their head on straight.

At that point, Sanji and Laki spotted them from on high. “Hey, Captain!”

“Oh my God, they’re flying!” Shrieked four of the five previous strangers, with Amanda simply gaping up at them as the little boy charged forward, pulling away from Milia’s hold and rushing towards the two newcomers shouting, “Fly, fly, teach me to fly!”

Sanji looked at the little kid, then looked over at Laki, who was chuckling, shaking her head, even as she knelt down to pop the little kid on the nose to stop him from running into her. “I take it you guys found some settlers then?” She inquired before standing up and moving around the kid, although she also was looking at Milia, who had rushed towards her little brother to try and stop him from bothering the two newcomers. She patted the younger girl on the head then looked at her Captain.

“What about you two? Did you run into any trouble?” Luffy asked.

“Nope. That crew of pirates didn’t have a single real fighter among them,” Sanji said, shaking his head. “Frankly, sending both of us was overkill.”

“But you needed someone along to hold your hand Sanji,” Laki said mock-sweetly. “Otherwise, you might have mistaken that long-haired blue-haired guy for a girl and gone all to pieces.”

Zoro nodded, giving the sharpshooter a thumbs up as Sanji whined about her doing him a disservice. “Nice zing.”

Laughing, Luffy ignored the byplay and the fact the Sanji was now glaring at Zoro. “Did you find the name of that pirate crew at least? That music attack of theirs was annoying.”

“Wait! Music attack! That’s got to be Bayan and his chorus line!” Bonney and Maccus looked at one another, then looked at the newcomers. “Wait, you beat him and Zap?! Zap was so strong he could bend metal!”

“Zap? Ah, the guy with the tan skin and the red hair. I think one of the others called him that as we were fighting. As to beating him, yes, we did. Easily.” Sanji said with a nod, lighting up another

cigarette and holding out his lighter to Laki, who lit her own cigarette from it, blowing out a smoke ring that turned into a spiral in the air. "Without that music of theirs, they didn't really have anything to fall back on."

Laki nodded in agreement. "We kicked their butts, then disarmed them, tied up the blue-haired guy and this Zap character, then dumped them all back in their ship's boat before kicking it back out onto the ocean. If they come back after that, they are just gluttons for punishment, not a real threat."

"Cool. Have enough energy to start making this an early dinner?" With enough to include our new friends here?"

"Roger that, Captain," Sanji said, and he and Makino headed back towards the ship.

"Wait, wait, you're saying you beat Bayan and his pirates! But there's so few of you?"

"Quantity over quality, baby," Frankie said, setting down the dinghy, which he had completely repaired and remade while everyone else was busy with Amanda and her gang. "This thing was so simple, it made me weep just to look at it, but at least you can paddle around in it now. I wouldn't trust it on the Grand Line, of course, but still, from what I started with, I think this is about as good as it's going to get."

Everyone stared at the boat, then up at Frankie's annoyed expression. That had been just a small ship's dingy, barely big enough for six people if they were very friendly. Now it was still that same size, but the sides had been enhanced, a sail been added, and a smiley face had been painted on the front to go along with the bottom of the hull being reinforced.

"Wow!" Holy shouted, moving to ask them both and looking inside, finding that the seats had also been enhanced, with small padding added. "It looks amazing!"

"Of course it does. It was built by the suuuuper me!" Frankie said, poking himself in the chest, causing a clang of metal on metal.

Smirking as Holy began to jump up and down, asking Franky questions about his appearance and that sound, Luffy turned back to Amanda. "What Frankie said. We sunk his ship out at sea pretty easily. The funniest thing is the fact they attacked us at all. I mean, we're the Straw Hat Pirates, so a bunch of no-name pirates like that should know not to mess with us."

He watched as Amanda, Maccus and Bonney all cocked their heads to one side. "Straw hats?"

"How long have you been on this island?" Nami asked, shaking her head. She might not like the fame that they'd been getting recently, but she couldn't deny it either, and Luffy was right. They'd clearly stated they weren't looking for trouble, but the other pirate crew had still attacked them with their weird body control music.

"We lost track of time. Probably a month or so?" Amanda mused, frowning before smiling slightly. "Still, Bayan and Zap are gone. That's... That's a relief."

"Why? Or should I say, why him specifically?" Robin asked.

"Er, well, you see..." Bonney hemmed and hawed for a moment, but feeling all the Straw Hats eyes on them, she and Maccus caved quickly while Amanda rolled her eyes. At this point, they had no

real choice but to tell these strange but incredibly powerful pirates their story and hope they didn't ask too many questions.

The castaways' tale came out at that point. The three kids were the children of a treasure hunter, explorer and archaeologist of some repute in this area of the Grand Line. He had been working with, or for, Amanda wasn't clear on that, Bayan when he apparently found a treasure bigger than any seen before.

This news caused Nami to dance in place until Bonney went on. "But Amanda's the only one who knows where it is, and because of that, Bayan captured all three kids. We er, we kind of broke them out of the brig and followed Amanda's directions to this island, and we've been digging for it since."

"Heh, it has actually been kind of fun and way easier than we thought," Maccus added, sounding somewhat proud of their accomplishments. "We were able to dig out a whole cave for ourselves, complete with a few smaller rooms and shelves."

That sounded strange to Robin, and her brows furrowed pensively while Nami was still looking at Amanda suspiciously. *If I were a little girl captured by pirates and thought I could talk a few into helping me break out, then I'd have done it.* "You don't know what kind of treasure it is? Only that it is here on this island? So how do we know there even is a treasure here at all?"

Amanda didn't so much as twitch, but that very non-response was enough for Nami, who scowled until she felt Luffy's gaze on her. She sighed, and then Milia spoke up. "It's here. Daddy never lied to us. The map, it's right."

That caused Amanda to scowl, but she bit down her response and looked at her much younger siblings as Holy spoke up. "Mmm, Daddy gave me this toy, and, and always told us about his adventures, he said the treasure was as big as his love for us!"

"Yeah, how can you even question such innocent children? They'd never lie to us," Maccus added, shaking his head at Nami. "You have a really twisted soul, don't you?"

"Leave my soul out of this!" Nami barked, smashing the Afro-man to the dirt with a single blow to the back of the head. She glared down at him, then reined in her anger once more, remembering the fact that she was the ship's navigator. "And how long does it take a log pose to reset here?"

"It doesn't. Or it hasn't yet for us," Bonnie answered, holding out their own log pose, somewhat intimidated by the orange-haired girl. The Log Pose on her wrist was pointing sideways and to the right to a different island than the one that Nami's log pose was pointing towards. "We've been here a month, and it hasn't reset."

Nami's eyes narrowed, and she frowned thoughtfully, looking around her. A mystery like this tickled her navigator's instincts, overriding her greed.

"Food is done!" Sanji shouted.

Pushing himself away from the tree had been leaning against, Luffy moved over to Amanda, scooping the little girl under one arm. "Come on, let's go eat." Ignoring her shouts of put me down, help, kidnapper, Luffy hopped into the air and over towards the Everlasting Resolve, with the others following

behind more sedately in most cases. Holy and Milia found themselves perched on Frankie's shoulders as the large shipbuilder made his way through the shoreline towards the ship.

The meal was a big hit with the castaways, all five having second or even third helpings, while more details about their stay on the island and escape from Bayan's pirate crew came out.

"And you're certain this treasure is here?" Nami asked, both obsessively and now very skeptically.

"It is. Milia is right about that, although I had no idea what the treasure might actually be," Amanda snorted, shaking her head. She'd lost a lot of her wariness of the Pirates during the meal, even though she knew that Nami at least knew she had been lying up to this point to get Maccus and Bonnie to help her and her siblings. "Our father was always rushing off after this or that treasure, chasing his dreams, and the treasure in question varied wildly."

She made the word dream sound like an epithet, and Luffy could understand why. If her father left behind not one but three kids, and there didn't seem to be a mother in the equation any longer, that was irresponsible in the extreme. *Like Garp-level irresponsible, but at least he found some bandits to look after me when I was younger, not that I really needed it.*

"Can I see the map at least?" Nami asked.

At that, Amanda grew shifty, and Nami glared at her, reaching across the table to poke her between the eyes. "I have mentioned I know when someone's trying to bullshit me, right? Out with that girl."

Amanda scowled, patting Nami's hand away and looking away. Robin looked at her, then shook her head. "Don't pressure her Nami, after all, we've only known them for a few hours."

"Right, and once more, I gotta remind ay, it's not as if we care all that much," Luffy said, overriding Nami's immediate response by shaking his head. "Again, we're not here for treasure. We're here for training, and I think we should get to it."

All of his crew members groaned theatrically at that, including Franky, who had yet to be subjected to Ranma's training. Even Robin joined in, a smile of amusement crossing her face as she made the same noise as everyone else.

Ruthlessly their Captain ignored their moaning. "Makino, Laki, Nami, I want you three to work on fighting multiple opponents for half your time, and then Laki, Nami leg training for the other half. Robin, toughness training. Frankie and I will set up something to help with that, and meanwhile, you will help the girls with their multiple opponent training."

Robin nodded that as it made sense, and Luffy went on. "Frankie, you know what you need to work on."

"Leg strength," Franky answered. Luffy was adamant that he wanted everyone in the crew to at least know Geppo just in case.

"Chopper, you're going to train with me, and Sanji, Zoro..." Luffy looked over at them both, sending each of them a smirk. "Go to the other side of the island, and fight. Fight until the sun comes

down, and then tomorrow, do it again only interrupted by mealtimes. You're both at the point where sparring and truly testing yourself against someone near to your equal is the best way to get stronger. That, and doing it day after day will be endurance training too, which will help you build up your Haki."

Both of the other men grinned, then sent one another challenging glares.

Seeing that, Laki shook her head, clapping her hands together in mock prayer. "Well, it was a nice island."

The rest of the crew laughed while the five castaways looked on in some confusion wondering why the idea of the swordsman and the cook sparring with one another had elicited that response. Even if this crew had defeated Bayan, there was no need for that level of wariness, was there?

"But what about the treasure?" Nami grumbled.

Done with trying to stop Nami from talking about it, Luffy shook his head. *I swear she's as bad as a bloodhound on a trail.* "If you want to help the castaways look for it, that's fine. But do it on your own time after lunch for a few hours. We will stay here for a week before moving on."

Sanji nodded at that. "If that's the case, Captain, I'd like permission to look around at some point for various herbs and other things of that nature. Not just the birds and the fruits." He had paused occasionally on their trip back from dealing with Bayan to grab a few pineapples, which he had used during the dinner, and he knew there were lots more out there. And spices and herbs were always in need on the ship.

Luffy nodded permission to that and then looked over at Chopper, who was suddenly fighting his flight or fight instincts. "Come on, Chopper. You can help Frankie and me set up the toughness training area, and then, you and I are going to perform a few experiments."

Scene break

This was a town somewhere on the Grand Line. Portions of it looked damaged, as if from a recent battle, but not the majority of it. When the town's militia had been defeated on the shoreline, the pirates had offered to accept the town's surrender in return for the town's treasure and supplies. The people were then allowed to go back to their lives unmolested, the dead of the militia kept around as a reminder of the cost of breaking the agreement.

Their pirate ship, the *Nostra Castello*, was currently taking on supplies. This was a mid-size ship with overlarge sails in a triple-mast pattern, the sails currently furled in port. The ship was quite wide, which showed it wasn't made for speed, instead it was made to smash its enemies with overwhelming firepower. This concept was aided further by the stone tower-like structure at the prow, which contained two forward-facing cannons. These cannons, along with the broadside cannons, were larger than average. And around the vessel, around forty men were moving supplies up onto the deck or from there down into the hold.

Meanwhile, in the best restaurant in the town, the Capone Bege of the Fire Tank Pirates sat at the head of a long table lined with other crew members. The remains of a meal were in front of him, and the proprietor and cook of the establishment waited nearby, trembling as Capone delicately tapped his mouth with his napkin before holding out his other hand. One of his men opened up an expensive-

looking cigar case, offering it to him. Bege took one out, dipped the end into a brandy sniffer, and then placed it in his mouth before another man came forward with a lighter.

After a few puffs, Capone nodded, taking the cigar out of his mouth and waving it at the two gentlemen. "The meal was adequate. You may go."

Both men bowed thanks, and Capone leaned back, savoring his cigar, as around him, the rest of his crew enjoyed their own meal. "Runner."

At Bege's one-word order, there was the sound of a small bell, and what looked like a small hatch opened up on one of Bege's fingers. He held his hand out to one side, and a tiny man appeared in the hatch, running out of it into the air. He skidded to a halt, turned and saluted, before standing at rest. "Aye, Father?"

"Find the town library. Bring back every newspaper they have for the last two weeks. I want to know what's been going on in the world," Bege ordered, and the man instantly ran off while Bege went back to puffing on his cigar contentedly. Life was good.

Out to sea, another pirate ship, a familiar large galleon with a circus tent on the main deck, came within sight of the town. The Buggy pirates were here.

Usopp, who was in the crow's nest, saw the other pirate ship already in the port and quickly reported this to Buggy. "Hmm... Capone Bege. He's a rookie but is apparently well known enough to gain a pretty high bounty," Buggy mused, staring at the wanted poster, one of many that they had gotten at the last island they'd visited. "But we need supplies. We've been at sea for too long, and if we don't get some fresh fruit aboard, were in danger of scurvy. Again," he finished with a grumble as the survivors of their foray into the Calm Belt shivered nearby.

With a rag of white tied to its prow signifying peaceful intentions, the *Little Big Top* moved into the port, tying up well away from the other pirate ship. "What about the other pirate crew? Are we going to fight them?" Alvida inquired. Since she was hefting her massive club onto one shoulder, the idea didn't seem to bother her all that much.

But as always, Buggy was cautious. "I don't think we need to. Send one of the crew to talk to that group of pirates over there moving supplies onto their ship. If there is enough to go around, there's no need to fight." Buggy answered.

He was in no real rush to fight another pirate crew, especially one who had recently seen a major jump in the bounty of their Captain as this one. *Although I have to wonder if that big a bounty is because of how he tricked the marines into doing his dirty work or because of his crew's actual combat skills?* "If there's no big treasure to be had here, then we're just better served to fill up on supplies and go."

Nodding at that, Alvida ordered Usopp to stay up in the crow's nest as the rest of the crew waited. Soon, the man sent to the other pirate crew was back and reported that the Capone pirates didn't want any further trouble here and were willing to let them take what supplies they need it so long as they didn't make any trouble with the town. "Apparently, their captain was willing to allow the town to surrender to them after their militia were beaten, and it's now under his protection for the duration of their stay."

“Makes sense. If the locals are willing to give up what you want, why bother killing them for it?” Buggy opined, nodding and gesturing his crew forward. “Get a move on, you lot. We’ll load up the supplies, and...”

He was interrupted by Usopp shouting out, “Sail-Ho! One ship coming over the horizon...” Usopp’s voice trailed off as he waited for the other ship to come close enough for him to see any sign of a flag or anything similar, then his face paled, and his voice rose into a near-shriek. “It’s a marine ship! One of their battleships!”

Cursing, Buggy looked around and began to bark out orders for his crew to hurry it up. “Usopp, be prepared to engage, you know the drill we talked about. Everyone but Alvida and the attack team, get moving double time.” He held up a fist, rallying his crew from the surprise with the ease of years of oration. “We need the supplies, dammit, and if we have to sink another Marine ship, we’ll flashily do it!”

They really did need the supplies. They had been out of fruit for three days and were down to their last few portions of salted pork and only had a few onions remaining of vegetables. That was part of the problem of having such a large crew. Fresh water would also have been an issue if not for Usopp. He had proved that he had a decent engineering bent and had created a few cisterns, which caught rain and stored it in the hold.

A scuffle began to break out between the two pirate crews as they fought for the supplies that the townsfolk had gathered. But when news of a Marine battleship was shared with them, Capone’s pirate crew understood the urgency of the newcomers, and one of them ran to get their Captain even as many of the others continued to fight for their supplies.

Back in the restaurant, Bege hadn’t moved from his place at the head of the long table. Indeed, when the runner from the docks came in, it looked as if his Captain had frozen. Bege held a newspaper in one hand, his cigarette having fallen into his brandy glass from his other hand utterly unnoticed. His bounty poster rested on the table, as well as several other newspapers.

Capone had found his newest bounty, and rather than being pleased, had been horrified by how much he had grown for seemingly no reason. That was why he had begun to read through the newspapers the locals had kept around, only to find the one detailing ‘his’ escapade in Water 7.

“What the hell is this!” he suddenly shouted, smashing his hands down on the table, throwing himself to his feet. “Find me the mayor!”

“S, sir, we have a marine battleship incoming,” the runner from the docks stuttered, holding up a hand.

Bege snarled. “Belay finding the mayor then. We’ll find out the answers by fighting these Marines. Prepare the fortress for battle!”

That won him a cheer from the rest of his gang, and he marched out of the room as alarms began to ring from his body once more. Dozens of tiny doors across his entire body began to open, and guns were run out. This was the power of the Shiro-Shiro Devil Fruit. A paramecia-type Devil Fruit, this had given Bege the power of an entire fortress within himself. He normally had the majority of his crew,

which was based on his gang as a mafia don, several hundred strong, stored within, along with more than enough cannons and guns to go around.

If anyone on that Marine battleship thought that they had the firepower advantage over the Fire Tank Pirates, Bege was going to prove them very, very wrong.

Buggy looked up from bellowing orders at his crew as the other pirate Captain made his way down the street along with two dozen more heavily armed crewmen. "You'd be Capone Bege then?"

"And you're Buggy the clown," Capone said, nodding his head very slightly to the other Captain. "I note your people are taking my supplies."

"We haven't touched your ship or anything already aboard, and we haven't even hurt your crew all that much." Buggy scoffed, ignoring the fact a few of the Capone gang were laid out nearby unconscious. "As far as I'm concerned, it's still plunder until it's aboard your ship." They glared at one another, then turned away. They had a marine battleship incoming, after all.

"Very well. I'll allow it this time, but the next time we meet, be prepared to pay the price for using our hard work to your own advantage."

Buggy smirked, noticing the open doors in the other pirate's body and splitting himself up into dozens of different body parts. "If you really want it, I'll be happy to pay in the same coin you used in the first place."

Capone snorted at that and made his way over to his ship but paused, staring up into the sky. A marine officer had already made his way from the ship to the shore, using Geppo and Soru to cover the intervening distance far faster than any ship could have. A middle-aged man with craggy features and deep-set, black eyes, he had left behind his cloak, leaving him in a suit, a Commodore's markings on his shoulder.

"Above us!" At Bege's shout, both pirate crews spread out, staring up at the man in the sky above them but not firing yet. Something about this whole situation had even the least-experienced pirate there on edge.

As he began his descent, the marine showed no fear, only anger as he shouted out, "Pirates, surrender or die!"

"Fire!" Capone roared, pointing the guns sticking out of his body from the front in the direction of the Marine officer.

"I will take that as proof that you intend to resist." The man said calmly, even as the tiny cannonballs of the guns poking out of Capone's body left a field of some kind around Capone, growing to the size of normal cannonballs as he raced towards him.

The marine officer continued his slow descent to the ground, letting the cannonballs strike him, and a second later, the reason became apparent. The cannonballs burst through him, melted into so much sludge, only passing through the marine due to the momentum of the shots. And as he landed, Magma began to flow from his feet and hands, and he stalked forward, reaching for the nearest pirates.

“T, that’s Akainu!” But he’s an Admiral, what in the hell is...” Capone had a second to shout before the Marine logia user was in and among his crew, magma flaring out to flow or strike several of them, burning them to a crisp.

Knowing a logia user was beyond all of them, Buggy started to retreat, skirting around the fight and making for his ship, even as he pulled out a fistful of daggers. “Get to the ship!” he ordered, gesturing Alvida and the rest of the crew to follow him.

But as they ran, two things occurred. One, Akainu became aware of Buggy, and two, Usopp started to fire out to sea with his special rifle from the crow’s nest.

Getting the boy to set aside his slingshot had been an uphill battle. But he had finally decided to switch over to a rifle and then had modified it to an insane degree. Now the gun’s barrel was about as long as he was tall and grooved, which forced Usopp to use bullets he created himself. But that, plus a series of sighting devices in the barrel and in a set of goggles he used, allowed Usopp to shoot at tremendous ranges.

On the Marine ship, the steersman felt aside, screaming as one of the bullets had slammed into his shoulder. Another man rushed toward the wheel, only to be struck similarly in the leg.

Then, Usopp was screaming as a ball of magma slammed into the mainmast of Buggy’s ship, right below the crow’s nest, burning the wood there to ash instantly. He leaped for cover while Alvida and the attack charged towards the Marine officer.

“Don’t try to fight him, you flashy morons!” Buggy shouted, even as he lashed out with a Busoshoku-enhanced fist, towards the Marine officer.

This was the first attack Akainu took seriously, and reforming one limb, he batted it aside with his own Busoshoku-enhanced hand, staring back at Buggy. Yet one of his hands remained outstretched, sending a wave of magma along the dock and onto the aft portion of Capone’s ship, the sizzling of the steam as it impacted the water drowning out every other noise in the battlefield. Even as the Fire Tank pirate’s captain tried to race towards his ship, half of it turned to ash, and the rest of his mighty floating fortress instantly began to sink into the harbor.

Capone turned back to the admiral, shooting again, as he charged forward’s, shouting to his men to fire at him as well. “Overwhelm his ability to keep his human form! When Akainu’s forced to change his head into magma, we can make a break for it.”

Even as these attacks hammered into them, Akainu concentrated on Buggy, battering aside Buggy’s attacks which Buggy launched in his Bara Bara Barrage as he bounced away trying to get some distance, his feet racing away as fast as they could. A rifle round smacked into Akainu’s face going through his head from one side to another, and he turned slightly to glare at the direction of that hit before turning back to Buggy the clown. “I didn’t anticipate two pirate crews here, but do not think you are going to escape me, Buggy!”

Akainu had been demoted to Commodore for his part in what the head office of the Marines was calling the Water 7 debacle. He argued against it, but for once, he had faced the united front of Garp, Sengoku, Tsuru, Aokiji and even Kizaru and Fleet Commandant Kong. Without any of his backers in the World Government interceding on his behalf and the evidence of how badly he had screwed up,

Akainu had been left without a leg to stand on. Water 7 was just too important to ship construction in Paradise, and even in a way in the New World, for them to overlook an assault on the island itself like that. The cover story had to be followed, and Akainu had to be punished for his part in that debacle.

“No one is arguing that the Straw Hat crew is a danger,” Sengoku had said, only to be interrupted by Garp growling angrily to one side until silenced by a punch from Kong to the back of his head. “No one that isn’t already biased anyway. But the way you went about it, the use of a Buster Call on Water 7, that is what you are being punished for. If you had just let them alone, Tsuru’s plan would have worked perfectly.”

There was a simple way Akainu could get back in the good graces of his superiors and fellow admirals. Bring in Capone, dead or alive, so that the cover story could remain in place. Toe the line, don’t try to single-handedly bring in the straw hats, and then do well against Whitebeard in the confrontation that everyone could see coming.

So that was what Akainu had set out to do. Using the vast number of Eternal Poses that the Marines had access to, he had learned the name of the last island the Capone Pirates visited and then had simply traveled straight to this one to cut off their route.

On the other hand, Buggy being here was a surprise. For decades, everyone in the marines thought he was just a bad apple, a weakling who had somehow survived on the Roger Pirates, but then he had wiped out a marine base after escaping, including several civilians, and then gone on to somehow intercept Commodore Drake and his men before their mission could even start. *Truly, he was just hibernating, waiting for the right moment to show his true strength, just like Kong was worried about.*

Drake had been given command of a band of marines who were ordered to become pirates and start to ingratiate themselves into the pirate community with the eventual task of infiltrating one of the Yonko’s crews and weakening it from the inside. It had been a long-term operation, but one that could have paid off handsomely in the end. But thanks to Buggy and his crew, that hadn’t happened.

With the *Nostra Castello* sinking, Akainu turned his attention to the other one, only to be forced to dodge and dagger thrown from Buggy, gleaming with Busoshoku. The next second, a massive club slammed into his head, the club melting on impact, further distorting his body for a second.

Momentarily blinded before he could reform an eye, Akainu could still use Kenbunshoku and launched his next attack all around himself. Monstrous stones of magma formed from the main mound of magma that was his body, bursting out in every direction. Several struck the side and main deck of the *Little Big Top* and burned through it, causing the ship to take on water quickly, while another one took out its secondary sails, and a third crashed into the first mate of the Capone gang, causing him to scream in agony as he was burned alive.

Capone’s eyes widened, and he bit through his cigar in rage. Raising his hands, Bege fired every weapon in his arsenal at Akainu, trying desperately to slow him down as the few survivors of his crew not inside his body started to flee past him deeper into the town. So panicky was their flight the pirates tossed away weapons and anything else that could slow them down.

But unlike the Grand Line veteran Buggy, Capone had no Busoshoku. Indeed, like most rookies, he had no idea what it even was.

Akainu head reforming elsewhere out of another mound of magma, he spread his arms out to either side, directing the flow of his magma even as his body reformed under him. The magma slowly moved out, creating what amounted to a moat around the docks, keeping the Pirates from escaping. He flinched as a dagger once again infused with Busoshoku came towards his face, but this time, magma simply coated his own face with Busoshoku, taking the strike.

Then Buggy bits were in front of him, hammering as fast as Buggy could make them go, each of them covered with Busoshoku.

Usopp also charged, having leaped off of the crow's nest even as it crashed. Now, Usopp crouched there, smacking himself in the face for a few seconds, muttering to himself, "I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid, I'm not afraid!"

Then he began to change. Soon, where Usopp had stood, a massive Allosaurus stood bent low, his small, almost useless front arms dangling, his mouth wide and showing its teeth which would have made a great white green with envy. With a bone-shaking roar, he charged forward.

But as powerful a Zoan type as the Allosaurus was, it was next to nothing against the power of the magma fruit. Akainu simply lazily turned his head away from where it had been getting pummeled from Buggy and raised a single finger. The magma moat that Akainu was still connected to bubbled, and an arc of it headed towards the charging dinosaur.

Dino-Usopp saw it coming and leaped out of the way, but the heat of it still scalded in his scales, causing him to cry out in pain, reeling away. Another magma ball crashed into the side of one of the dinosaur's legs, causing him to collapse as it seared through the skin there. It was only because of his tougher scales that he didn't lose the entire leg, but it was a near-run thing.

After losing her club to the magma user, Alvida retreated quickly and took to hiding around a corner. She wasn't willing to see if her Sube-Sube Fruit could defend itself against attacks of that nature. Now she ran forward, unwilling to leave Usopp – the only other sane person aboard their ship - behind, even as she shouted out for the rest of their crew to run. "Usopp, change back!"

Groaning in agony, Usopp obeyed, shifting to his normal skinny teenage body. Alvida lifted him in her arms with a bit of effort, careful not to let him slide out, always an issue with her fruit. Then she turned and, even with the added weight, cleared the magma moat in one prodigious leap.

Nearby, she could see a few of the other crewmen and shouted, "Run, you idiots! We can't fight him!"

Buggy's mouth flew through the air towards them, and he agreed with Alvida. "She's right. Akainu's way too powerful, and I'm the only one of us with any chance of even hurting him, and not much of one. You all need to get out of here. I'll try to back away when IEEE EEE!!!!!"

The clown pirate cut off as one of his feet nearly caught fire, and he screamed, his body parts pulling back away from where they had been pummeling Akainu. Reformed into his body once more, Buggy grabbed at his foot, hopping in place. But thankfully, the pain from the closeness of the magma

had hit him before the magma was able to sear through his boot, and while his feet were scalded from the heat, they were still there.

By this point, Akainu had already dealt with most of Capone's gang and now had one armor-clad boot on the man's face, the boot having appeared out of a bit of the magma moat, as Capone tried to make for the opening at the back, heading deeper into town. An escape that was now cut off as the magma moat rose to tower over the docks, trapping Buggy within.

Desperately Buggy grabbed his feet and hurled them upwards, his body bursting into hundreds of parts and following them. But even as Buggy strained upwards, even that last escape route was cut off, the top of the moat collapsing inward.

Seeing this, Buggy reformed, covering his whole body with Busoshoku, shaking under the strain. But instead of retaining its malleable form, the magma hardened as Akainu appeared out of it from above, dropping towards him, his own body likewise clad in black.

Seeing this, Buggy separated, allowing Akainu to pass through, but as he did, Akainu's back burst open, his Busoshoku ending instantly as he lashed out with magma. This forced Buggy back and away from the top of the magma mound.

He was forced to land nearby, reforming his body as he gasped both at the heat of the interior of the mound of magma and at the strain of his Busoshoku. Even so, he pulled out more knives, glaring at the admiral.

Once more, Akainu slowly reformed his body, stepping forward and staring at Buggy under his cap. "Buggy the clown, former cabin boy of the Roger Pirates! Surrender, now! You're wanted dead or alive, Clown, and I don't care which!"

Seeing no chance to escape, Buggy snorted, and on the one foot that hadn't had its boot burned before he could use his Busoshoku, a dagger appeared. "What kind of flashy pirate would I be if I surrendered? Even I have my pride as a member of the Roger Pirates, damn it!"

"So be it." Snorting, Akainu moved forward, covering his own hands with Busoshoku. Thus far, this fight had been somewhat boring for him, and he wanted to fend some of his frustrations. *And bringing in Buggy the Clown for questioning is better in the long term than parading Capone around. That one's head will do.*

Indeed, at the moment, Bege's head was all that could be seen. The rest of his body had been melted away by magma a moment before.

"Bara bara barrage!" Buggy shouted, launching his arms and feet towards the admiral.

Near the edge of the town, Usopp groaned in agony as he was pulled along by two of the other survivors, Alvida having handed him over the moment she could. Yet even as he was going, he could feel his body dealing with the pain, shutting down pain centers and starting to scab over. Zoan types had a monstrous regeneration ability, and in an ancient type like Usopp's, that was heightened even further. So long as he didn't lose any limbs or organs and Usopp had retained the leg, he would heal back to one hundred percent given enough time.

And Usopp's mind remained lucid enough to understand that something was wrong. "The captain, we can't leave him," he moaned.

At the head of the group of eight survivors, Alvida shook her head. "We can't fight that monster. Much as I don't like it, we can't do anything for him now."

A part of Alvida was surprised that she really was speaking the truth there. Who knew that Buggy would grow on her?

Usopp groaned again but didn't say anything coherent for a time as they left the cobblestones behind and began to move through a heavily wooded area, Alvida leading the way out of the town and deep into the hills. They would hide out in the woods as far away from the town as they could get for a while. *Maybe once the marines leave, we'll be able to come back and force the locals to make us a ship to get away permanently. But for now, all we can do is survive.*

Hours later, Alvida slid down a tree, having climbed up with some difficulty thanks to her fruit, and kept watch, ensuring no one was coming after them. With Usopp's rifle in hand, she could even see the Marine ship leaving the port, dragging the wreckage of the two pirate ships out to sea before releasing them to the depths.

Once on the ground, Alvida looked around at the other pirates, saying the words that all of them had wanted to hear since they had hidden here. "The marines are gone. They seem to have been content with capturing or killing most of our crews," she added darkly. "We'll hide out here for a few days, then send some of the crew into town to get the lay of the land."

"That, or that marine bastard only cared about Capone Bege," Usopp murmured, shaking his head. "I don't think we even registered. Not as threats anyway." That was humiliating and very, **very** frightening for the teller of tall tales and the self-professed coward who wanted to become a man of the sea.

"Maybe so," Alvida shrugged, grateful that her own bounty barely even registered in terms of Grand Line bounties. "The question is, what do we do now long term?"

Usopp pushed himself up the tree he had been leaning his head against. His wound wasn't going to heal overnight, but the marksman didn't seem to be in as much pain as before, thanks to one of the others wrapping some aloe leaves around his numerous burns.

Now Usopp shook his head. "What do you think we are going to do? We rest and recuperate, as you said. And then maybe, if we can, we get on a ship and go on to the next island, where we search for news about where the Marines keep their prisoners. Then we get the captain out!"

"How do we not know he isn't already dead?" Alvida scoffed. "Seemed to me that the mad dog of the marines wasn't taking any prisoners today. He was here for Capone Bege and burned half his body in his magma for Davy Jones' sake!"

Gulping, Usopp stumbled back but rallied quickly. "Y, yeah, but I think that's a mark in favor of Akainu capturing Buggy." Alvida frowned, and Usopp went on quickly. "Think about it, the marines love to parade captured pirates around, and with Capone dead, Buggy should be the one used like that."

Alvida had to concede the self-styled Brave Man of the Sea had a point. The marines really enjoyed showing how 'compassionate' they were compared to pirates, and they also loved making examples of pirates they captured. This sometimes bit them on the ass, as it had historically with the execution of Gold Roger, but they still did it.

"Fine, maybe you're right on that, but there are still too many ifs in your plan. First, we need to find a ship only ten crewmen can handle. Then we would need to break into Impel Down. You know, the prison that has never had an inmate escape from it and has never been broken into?" Alvida questioned sarcastically. "Heck even's its location is a secret known only to the higher-ups among the marines and World Government."

But Usopp didn't relent, shaking his head firmly. "We'd have to find such a ship anyway. And as for Impel down, there's a first time for everything! We just need enough information to plan. And maybe a lot of Marine uniforms when we get to it."

Alvida scowled, crossing her arms and glaring back at Usopp, then around at the others, who looked noticeably cheered up at the idea of trying to break Buggy out. Although Alvida noted that none of them thought about following the Marine ship and breaking Buggy out that way.

Not with Akainu around, she thought, shivering at the ease with which the logia user had dealt with them all. Alvida had known that the Marine admirals were powerful, but discovering how very, very, **very** low she was on the power scale of those who really mattered here on the Grand Line was infuriating.

But looking around at the faces around her, the raven-haired beauty could tell that none of her prospective crewmen were going to go with the idea of simply moving on, becoming her crew of pirates rather than Buggy's. And who can blame them? As far as they could tell, Buggy sacrificed himself to give us time to get away. I'm the only one who heard that he was going to make a break for it too.

"Fine. I'll agree to try to break Buggy out but, only if we have any chance at all of freeing him **before** he arrives at Impel Down. If not, then we will have to give him up. No matter what you say, Usopp, this crew isn't nearly skilled or strong enough to break into that prison, and you know it," Alvida growled, smacking Usopp's long nose with a finger. "I like Buggy, and I was happy enough to be under his command, but that doesn't mean I'm going to throw my life away to try to get him free."

Indeed, even now Alvida was wondering if she should break away from this crew. While she liked Usopp, his desire to save Buggy was overriding the common sense and intelligence that was his best aspect in her opinion. *I know I can survive on my own. Maybe I should look into leaving the crew after we get to the next island? While I don't think any of the locals had the chance to get a good look at me, I would wager the marines will send a follow-up group here to help the locals rebuild, so I can't stay here.*

Usopp tried to glare back at her but eventually just looked away and nodded. What little information about Impel Down was available certainly backed up Alvida's opinion on it. Then he seemed to rally, smacking his thin chest. "Just leave it to me. I'm a master of planning and lies, remember?"

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence,” Alvida muttered even as the other men cheered quietly. *I just hope this doesn’t get us all in jail right next to Buggy before I can split away. Or worse, sleeping with Davy Jones...*

Scene break

With a full week spent only on training under their belts, Luffy saw quite a lot of progress, although not quite as much as he had hoped. Chopper was the one exception. Over the past week, Luffy had worked almost exclusively with Chopper, and now, he could call Chopper an apprentice in the Anything Goes style, which utilized speedy changes from one form to another. Chopper’s training with his other forms had gone so well that he could now use two transformations he would otherwise have needed a Rumble Ball to achieve without them: his Heavy Gong point and his guard point. And in terms of ki, if Chopper kept up this level of progress when they returned to sea, he could perhaps achieve ki healing – conscious ki healing instead of the regular Zoan regeneration – within a month.

Nami, Makino and Laki were on the other end of the spectrum, unfortunately. Sadly, Luffy hadn’t figured out a way to be in two places simultaneously, even with his lightning fruit. He could create multiple lightning clones in the same general area, but not one copy on either side of the island doing their own thing. He just couldn’t split his attention like that at a distance. So, thanks to Luffy concentrating so much on Chopper, neither woman had been pushed as hard as they should have been.

Despite that, Nami was close to using Geppo, which Luffy was very happy to see. And for her part, Laki had practiced against multiple opponents every day and worked on her weapon. Nami was also working on the weather-based weapon for the ship. By this point, they were almost at the testing stage, although they were running into a problem of not having enough dials to go around for the first time. *The debates on that will be interesting going forward, Ranma* reflected before continuing to think about the progress the rest of his crew had made.

Between helping Nami and Laki with their training, Makino didn’t do much of her own. Instead, she spent time with the five castaways and taught the two adults how to cook. Luffy frowned now, remembering the argument they had about that, which Luffy had lost, agreeing with the fact the fivesome needed all the help they could get. After that, he had left her alone outside of forcing her to join Nami and Laki in endurance training in the late evenings, running around the island with Luffy to build up her stamina.

And the fact she can use her disappointed nee-san look on me if I try to push her doesn’t help when it comes to me trying to convince her to train more, Luffy grumbled, watching Makino blow up a beachball for Holy. *I know she’s good, and Makino’s got as good a head on her shoulders as any of the other girls.* Luffy blinked at that, pouting. *Oy, that’s like admitting all the guys on my crew are meatheads compared to the girls... best not to look at that too closely. But I can’t deny that she prioritizes helping others over her own growth a bit too much.*

Franky had sparred with Sanji and Zoro occasionally and Luffy in the evenings, and his own personal style was coming along very well. He was slow to change, but after getting pounded into the ground easily by all three of the crew’s ‘monster trio’, Franky was willing to step up his own training as well. Franky was also incorporating dial technology into his cyborg body. That he was doing so in the

form of what Franky insisted on calling ‘finger weapons’ disturbed Luffy for some reason, but he still approved.

Sanji and Zoro themselves had sparred every day, coming in only for the evening meal, forcing Makino to do most of the cooking for the day, which Sanji apologized profusely about, but seemingly couldn’t avoid due to, as he put it, “The shitty swordsman being too damn bloodthirsty to know when to stop.”

Of course, Zoro disputed that but astonishingly, after a whole day of sparring, neither had the energy to do anything more than shout at one another at night. Both of them were now showing a marked improvement in their Busoshoku and had expanded their own personal repertoires of attacks, something Luffy had seen while practicing his Kenbunshoku, and both had shown the unconscious form of ki healing to a tremendous degree.

Zoro’s still got an edge on Sanji in a serious fight, but the destruction of the sword he got from the shopkeeper back on Loguetown is holding him back. That and the whole not being able to use the edge of his swords unless attacking a body part Sanji’s covered with Busoshoku. Still, he can hold Busoshoku over his sword for hours now, and that is way better than the thirty minutes he was struggling with before. Now, if only he could remember to cover the rest of his body. “If a swordsman cannot deflect or block a blow, he deserves to carry a scar,” my ass.

With a snort for his first mate’s foibles, Luffy concentrated on a far better, and in Luffy’s opinion, far sexier topic: Robin. The statuesque brunette had finally begun to develop a sense of Busoshoku, although the cost had been quite high. Like Ryoga in Luffy’s old world, Robin was put through the toughness training as soon as breakfast was over and until dinner was ready. She was so sore and frustrated day after day and was so exhausted she didn’t even try to stay up reading, instead preferring to cuddle with Luffy in bed until they fell asleep and invariably moved away from one another due to their sleeping habits.

But by the time Luffy had called a halt to the training and declared the next day a full day of rest for everyone, Robin was able to coat her fingers in Busoshoku. And not just her own fingers, but those of the hands that she could conjure with her Devil Fruit. That was more than enough to make her almost as deadly as the Monster Trio.

All in all, Luffy thought as she laid out in his female form on a beach towel as the others caroused around her, its been a good week.

Seeing the five castaways in the water playing around reminded her of one final thing Franky had been doing this past week, and she looked over at him, raising her voice to be heard over the background noise. “Franky, do you think you’ll be able to finish Bonny and Maccus’ ship you’re building by tomorrow? Or should we stay another day here?”

“With how hard you’ve been pushing us, a part of me wants to say we should take another day,” Franky answered from where he was standing knee-deep in the ocean, batting a ball back to Chopper and the kids, the little Zoan floating around on a large inner tube. “But the work is almost done anyway. All I need to do is add a final coating and the sails.”

On top of his own training and occasionally repairing the training areas of Nami, Laki and Robin, Franky had spent some time during the night working on building a ship that two people could sail even on the Grand Line. Luffy had taken a look at it, and it was a really funny-looking ship. It was small, with an enclosed paddlewheel system giving its aft section a kind of bulbous look, made worse by the kitchen area being there too. The paddlewheel could be powered either by the wind, by a square sail, or by muscles, the equipment of which took up a large portion of the ship's interior. To top it off, it had a series of pearls etched out like the figure on a masthead at the front.

But with it and their own Log Pose, the fivesome, who had decided they wanted to stay together, would be able to get to the island the Log Pose was pointing at.

Hearing that, Luffy grunted and leaned back once more, soaking in the rays as she closed her eyes behind her sunglasses. She didn't look up as she felt Robin laid her head on Luffy's stomach, using it as a pillow as the older girl laid out on the sand. "Where did we get these beach towels from, anyway?"

"I believe Nami acquired them from a hotel back in Water 7," Robin replied.

"She didn't pay for them, then?"

"Why are you asking such a silly question?" Robin giggled.

Luffy snorted at that as she ran a finger through Robin's hair. "I feel like I haven't been a good boy, er, well, girlfriend currently, this past week." Robin made an interrogative noise, and Luffy went on somewhat sheepishly. "It's just, we haven't really spent any romance-type time together, erm, dates, eating a meal just the two of us, that kind of thing. I'm sorry, I've been concentrating so much on Chopper, getting him to the point where he doesn't need to rely on the Rumble Balls, except in dire circumstances and helping you and everyone else get stronger so much that I..."

"You were around often enough to give me encouragement, and occasionally you gave me massages at night when you could have been sparring with Franky. That is more than enough, as you put it, 'romance time'." Robin shook her head, turning her head from the book she had just pulled out to look up past the rise of her modest chest towards the redhead's eyes. "Luffy, realize that when it comes to real relationships, I have as little experience as you do. But I know one thing for certain. I am not a... what is the phrase, a high maintenance girl? I don't need my boyfriend around twenty-four seven. Indeed, that level of connection is disturbing to me. Each of us has our own lives, and I will not ask you to sacrifice needed crew time just for me. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does," Luffy said with a nod. "And I'm glad we can talk about things like this." Then she shrugged wryly. "It doesn't make me feel any less guilty about having to put you through the toughness training like that. It's a lot more impersonal that way than the way we were doing it on for the ship before, after all. Yet it is waaaay more effective too."

"While I might not wish to be the Pirate Queen," Robin teased gently, "I do understand and appreciate the need to get stronger over time. I'll take my lumps like a good girl for the payoff." She held up a finger, which darkened with Busoshoku, a small, extremely wicked smirk on her face. "Indeed, I am quite eager to show this little trick off in the future."

Something about the way Robin mentioned not wanting to be the Pirate Queen rang in Luffy's head. There was something there, something beyond a tease sent Rama's way due to his curse. But she didn't know quite what it was.

Nor did she have time to think about it because suddenly, a beach ball smacked into the side of Luffy's head. She blinked, caught the ball on the rebound and looked towards where it had come from, seeing that Sanji had joined the others in the water along with Laki. "Hey, Luffy, come and play with us!!"

Makino and Nami were nearby, talking quietly to Amanda. The girl had a notebook of all things out and seemed to be jotting down notes on whatever market was telling her. The grins on his two crewmen and the gleam in Amanda's eyes were kind of worrisome.

Deciding she didn't want to know, Luffy looked back down at Robin, then over at the guys and girls playing in the ocean. Batting the ball back to them, Luffy waved them off, making no efforts to rise. At the moment, just laying out with her girlfriend's head on her stomach sounded just right to the martial artist turned pirate captain.

The next day started with a surprise for the five castaways. Early on in their stay, Robin and Nami had sussed out the fact that this island wasn't really an island at all. Rather, it was a giant, monstrously-sized clamshell on which the detritus of wind and waves had created an island over time. The soil being so fine proved that time and time again as they created the training areas and looked at the cave system the castaways lived in. This was coupled with the fact that the normal Grand Line weather had appeared on their second day, battering the island with a storm that dropped snowballs the size of Franky's forearms onto the tropical island. The kids had a lot of fun with it, but it was quite obvious that no, this island did not have its own weather system.

After that, it was a simple matter to realize what kind of treasure the kids' old man had found.

With everyone else waiting on their ships, Zoro made his way into the clam's mouth, where he began cutting the fused bits of flesh that were keeping it closed. *As a going-away present, showing this off is going to take some beating.* Luffy thought, watching the clam open. It was another bright day, and the pearl larger than the Everlasting Resolve was long started to reflect the light even before the clam's mouth opened all the way.

On their own ship, the Fairly Odd Family, Amanda began crying, staring at the pearl, remembering her father saying that he had found a treasure being as big as his love for his children. She clutched her siblings to her as they both gaped at it in turn, with Milia joining her in letting out quiet sobs. Bonnie and Maccus stood nearby, gapping in shock at the size of the pearl.

Both of them shook their heads quickly, though, realizing one thing: the darn pearl was so big no one could ever move it! What was a pearl worth if you couldn't spend it anywhere? But neither was willing to interrupt the moment for the kids, and Maccus leaned forward, whispering into Bonney's ear. "It's a good thing the Straw Hats gave us some money along with supplies, huh?"

The white-haired girl could only nod in reply. Franky and Sanji had put enough food in their ship to last the family of five three weeks at sea, along with a water collector that would hopefully keep them in freshwater. And Luffy had dived down to the wreck of the enemy pirate ship and brought back all the

treasure within. This amounted to a single medium-sized chest, mostly of worked gold items and jewelry. Which Luffy had, over Nami's half-hearted objections, turned over to Maccus and Bonny.

Soon it became time to leave, and the two ships began to pull away from one another, the *Everlasting Resolve* making a slow turn to once more point dead-on as per the Log Pose it had, while the other ship continued on its way in a very different direction

Barring Zoro, who did not do feels very well, the rest of the crew were standing at the aft end of the ship around the Franky Special Cannon there, waving as the other ship slowly retreated over the horizon. Most of them stayed there for some time, but slowly everyone returned to their duties, with Makino seemingly taking leaving the kids the hardest.

That is kind of odd. I know Robin and Sanji liked having them around too. But Robin's got a lot of self-control, so her not showing her sadness at leaving them is one thing. Sanji, though, usually wears his feelings on his face for all to see.

With that thought, Luffy used his Kenbunshoku, becoming distracted by using his senses to follow the other ship as far as he could, which was, frankly, a frightening distance. *Damn, but the Lightning Fruit really does overpower Kenbunshoku when you're doing it right. Luffy could almost read people's surface thoughts with it if he tried, let alone anticipate their moves of keeping track of them. And my range is insane now that I'm doing it right. No wonder Enel-aho could tell what people were doing or saying anywhere near Sky Island. I wonder how long it will take me before I can do the same thing unconsciously rather than concentrating on it.*

As the other ship moved out of his range, Luffy remembered his initial purpose and sent his thoughts idly searching for his crew members. Doing so, he found Sanji in the kitchen, of course. But what he was doing...

Smirking, Luffy leaped down from where he had been standing on top of the crow's nest, heading into the tangerine trees. There, he found Nami and Laki talking quietly. Not having used Kenbunshoku to discover them rather his own two eyes, Luffy didn't know what conversation they were having.

Regardless, he was pleased that the two of them had gotten over a somewhat rocky start to Laki's inclusion into the crew. Despite clashing in their dress sense and combat instincts (Laki was a straightforward sort of fighter, while Nami wasn't) and how Nami liked to use her feminine wiles, whereas Laki felt that was beneath a warrior, the two of them had found some common ground. They weren't as close as Nami was to Robin or Laki to Makino, Laki and Makino having bonded over the guns, men and the problems with them, but they were still friends.

Both women looked up as Luffy landed next to them, and he smirked, holding up a finger to his lips. *And one of the things they bonded over is teasing Sanji. Funny that, given Laki's normal attitude towards Nami's use of her body in combat, but I suppose in combat and out of combat are two different things in her mind. "If you want prime teasing material, come with me."*

Both women's eyes lit up at that, and they eagerly followed him, making their way quietly into the ship and then back up into the conning tower, entering the kitchen from below. There, Sanji was supposed to be cleaning up after their last meal with the castaway family. Instead, he was leaning over

the sink, quietly crying, pounding his hand on the side of the sink. "Dammit, how can kids be so cute?! And Bonnie, poor Bonnie, to have to deal with Maccus for the rest of her life. It's such a tragedy!"

Luckily for Sanji and unluckily for his captain, the only part of that which was intelligible through his crying was about the kids. Hearing it, any thought of teasing him fled Laki and Nami's mind, and as one, they turned, smacking Luffy upside the head so hard they sent him crashing to the ground.

The crash caused Sanji to whirl towards them about the two girls ignored Luffy and the shock on Sanji's face, moving over to hug Sanji. "There, there. We couldn't have taken them with us, Sanji, not even Amanda. You know that. A pirate ship is no place for a kid, let alone three and two of them were so young too," Nami soothed.

"I'll miss them too, but at least they're off the island, and maybe the five of them can really become a family in the future. Because of you, Makino and Franky helping them along, Amanda and the others at least got a good start to things," Laki added her own piece.

Rubbing his head, Luffy turned around, hopping back down the steps. *The hell did I do?*

Annoyed at his lack of empathy, Laki and Nami didn't talk to Luffy for the rest of the day, even when he ordered them to show him their weapons during combat training. Instead, they became quite scary as they tried their best to hit the lightning man, with no success. It seemed as if making fun of Sanji's overemotional attitude had completely backfired, and Luffy noted that for the future.

Thankfully neither of them told the other girls about it, or else Luffy could easily see Robin and Makino joining them in giving Luffy the cold shoulder.

It only lasted a day, thankfully, and the next day, Nami had something else to be angry about. They dealt with a series of short squalls, each of them different than the last, and then had to deal with a whirlpool that appeared out of nowhere, trying to pull the ship in. But with Luffy in the engine room, the *Everlasting Resolve* easily powered through it. Which carried them right into a pack of sea monkeys, who tried to toy with the ship, creating waves between them.

That lasted until Laki used the aft gun, Franky's Lion's Roar cannon. While normally that would have killed them if the beam of plasma had been concentrated, set to the diffuse setting, it had merely wounded several of the sea monkeys, driving them off.

All in all, it was a regular day, and after dealing with the sea monkeys, the day became bright and clear. So much so the girls were tempted to bring out the lounge chairs.

Alas, this nice weather only lasted for about ten minutes. Then fog came up so quickly that it took even Nami by surprise. One moment, she was shouting out, "Fog ahead, it shouldn't last long," and the next, none of them could see more than a foot in front of their faces, the fog was so thick. The sun above disappeared entirely, and everything became gray and dull.

With Nami in the bridge, along with Franky and Makino, the rest of the crew gathered around the conning tower, with Zoro in the crow's nest. Standing in the open doorway of the Nami turned her face to the sky. "Luffy, can your Kenbunshoku tell us anything?"

"Not a thing," Luffy said, shaking his head, his eyes closed as he concentrated on his other senses. "I can't sense anyone out there with Kenbunshoku. There, there could be something but

nothing like a human mind. It feels almost like an animal mind, maybe a jellyfish or something? Beyond that, I could probably use lightning to find if there's anything solid out there."

"Let's keep that on the back burner," Nami answered, patting the doorway. "What about you, Eve?"

"Nothing," the spirit of the ship answered instantly, a mouth appearing on the roof of the bridge. "I'm not getting a sense that we're coming up on anything dangerous in the ocean if that's what you're asking."

Grumbling, Nami shook her head, glaring up at the fog all around the ship. "Dammit, where the fuck did this come from!"

"Grand Line," Luffy, Franky and Robin all answered as one, thinking that enough of an explanation.

Nami didn't, and she growled angrily, smashing one hand against the doorway, muttering an apology to Eve even as she did before shouting at the rest of the crew. "Stop that, dammit! Even here in the Grand Line, the weather doesn't just blow up like this. If something created it, like the sea monkeys created those massive waves, I could understand it. But I was able to detect every change in the weather all day today. There was no hint of anything that could be creating a fog. And, it's so damn thick!"

At that, Franky nodded his head thoughtfully, staring out the windows of the bridge himself. "Navigator-nee-san has a point. This is the densest fog I've ever seen, and you better believe that after Aqua Laguna, there've been a lot of thick fogs occasionally. We must have wandered into the Florian Triangle. Countless ships have been lost in this fog."

While Nami glared at Franky for the 'sister' line there (she already had one sibling and didn't want another, especially one with Franky's horrible fashion sense), Luffy just shrugged and repeated his last answer. "Grand Line. Prepare for the impossible because you're certainly going to get it."

Nami nearly broke down crying at that, smacking her hand again and again into the hatchway. "Goddammit, there need to be some rules of navigation and weather that aren't so flexible. I knew the Florian Triangle might be on our route, but the change from normal Grand Line weather to this is just too damn quick."

"Why?" The fact this came from many different throats, including Zoro from above, and even Makino and Laki, caused Nami's despair to turn into anger, and she shot to her feet, about to launch either an attack on the rest of the crew or a tirade, before pausing, as she stared out into the fog. "Luffy, are you sure there's nothing out there?"

Luffy nodded and was about to answer when a sepulchral singing voice reached their ears. "Yohohoho, Yohohoho... Binks no sake ni..."

Soon, out of the fog came what could only be seen as a ghost ship. It was a large galleon, almost the size of a marine battleship, but without the guns. It was old, battered, its sails were in tatters, its starboard side stoved in by cannon fire in places. All of the ship's guns were gone or rust-covered. The ship's prow might once have had a figurehead there, but it had long been transmuted into a nigh-

formless blob. One of the masts was missing entirely, and the other two were but stubs. It obviously moved here simply through the normal movement of the waves rather than under its own power.

All of the crew had lined up alongside the ship, staring at the ghost ship as it slowly passed them by, wondering where the music was coming from. Finally, on the aft castle, the crew saw a skeleton. But this wasn't a normal skeleton. Instead of being slumped or tossed to one side, lying where it had fallen as its flesh desiccated, this skeleton was standing upright on its own feet. It was also moving, playing the violin. It also had a full afro sticking out of its skull and wore what looked like a decent suit, if as faded and threadbare as the rest of the ship.

Everyone aboard the ship stared at it, and this skeleton stared back. "Yohohoho. Welcome, dear guests."

"GAAAAAAA!!!!!" Luffy and everyone bar Robin shrieked. And even she was gapping. "The skeletons talking!"

"Spirits away, spirits away!" Chopper whimpered, hiding behind Zoro as he thrust out an old gold and gem-covered cross from somewhere, from around Zoro's leg.

Surprisingly he wasn't the only one to have this reaction. Laki was now hiding Sanji and Franky, and while they had made no move to hide, both Nami and Makino grabbed their weapons and were prepared to defend themselves, with the orange-haired girl moving to stand beside her captain. Yet as they did, their faces were pale and their eyes wide.

However, deep within the hull of the ship, Eve was huffing in irritation. *Really? They talk to me every day. They know spirits exist. Is it because he's a skeleton? Really? You could put down their surprise as simply the fact a skeleton's talking, but Chopper and Laki at least are acting like he's scarier than someone who can pop out of anywhere aboard the ship and even turn it against you. And what's Chopper mean, spirits away? I feel insulted.*

"Yohohoho, what a nice reaction! Well then!"

As the stunned Straw Hats watched, the skeleton hopped down from the aft castle of the ghost ship onto theirs, the decks not having been of comparable height. There, he clicked his heels together, straightened his tie and walked towards them, jauntily twirling his cane sword in one hand. Even while stunned at the appearance of a talking skeleton, Luffy could hear the faint hint of clicking, indicating that it was indeed a cane sword rather than a regular cane. He stopped in front of Makino and Nami, bowing from the waist and trailing one hand along the top of the deck.

"Ladies, beauty such as yours is a sight for sore eyes. But of course, I don't have any eyes! Skull joke! But now," the creature went on before anyone could comment. "There is a most important question I must ask you all!"

Robin and the other girls looked at him in question as Nami stammered. "What, what's your question?"

"May I see your panties?"

The question was asked so seriously and in such a deadpan voice that for a moment, the actual content didn't register to Luffy and the majority of the crew. But Nami responded instantly, using Luffy's

shoulder as a mount to fling her entire body into a roundhouse kick that crashed into the side of the skeleton's head, sending it flying the full length of the ship to crash into the prow's safety railing. "Like hell I would let you!"

"My, a perverted skeleton, even living for as long as I have on the Grand Line, I will admit that is a first," Robin said conversationally to Franky, who was gaping at Nami, and making a mental note, once more, to not mess with the orange-haired girl.

"Okay, that's it!" Eve's voice came from everywhere at once, startling the skeleton, who then found his afro being jerked backward, his skull slamming back into the wood of the deck with bone-numbing force. "Honestly, what am I, chopped liver!? You have a freaking Klabautermann around, a spirit who only comes out as a ship dies, as a crewmember! And you're treating this, this over-dressed corpse as more startling than me? Come on!"

"That's true, Eve," Luffy soothed while Brook turned around wildly on the deck, trying to find whoever had spoken. "Sorry about that. For me, it's the whole talking skeleton thing that threw me."

"Erm, sorry, Eve," Chopper spoke up as the others all mumbled apologies. "It's just, we've gotten so used to talking to you that you're whole being a spirit thing doesn't matter much any longer. You're just Eve."

Eve could only be happy about that, but the afro-wearing skeleton was still looking around in confusion. "Ano, everyone, who exactly are you talking to? I have never heard of a Klabautermann, nor do I see anyone around.

"This coming from a talking skeleton?" Luffy shot back.

For her part, Eve released a barely audible huff, then scowled. *Ooh, if I were feeling better, I'd give Brook something to be really scared of. Still...*

With a thought, she summoned an arm out of the deck, poking at the skeleton. The skeleton whirled, but Eve's first arm had disappeared, to be replaced by another once more behind the skeleton, poking him again. This continued as the rest of the crew snickered for a time until the skeleton tripped over his own feet and collapsed to the deck once more.

"Still though, how is a skeleton talking? Or is he the Klabautermann for that ghost ship?" Robin questioned thoughtfully.

"No way. A Klabautermann can't leave its ship. Certainly not like the skeleton did," Franky answered, shaking his head firmly.

Sanji took a puff on his cigarette and tapped out the ash over the side of the ship, staring at where the skeleton was pushing himself to his feet. "Devil Fruit."

At that, the entire crew, even the three scared members, nodded in unison, smacking one fist into the palm of their other hand, "Ah, that's right!"

Luffy moved towards the skeleton, grabbing his arm and lifting the skeleton up into the air before setting him down on his feet. "My cook's right. This has to be some kind of Devil Fruit. What kind of Devil Fruit, though?"

Thrown off his pace first by the kick to his head, and now the suddenly changed attitude of the crew, the skeleton stammered. "Er, yes, well, but is that any kind of question to ask someone before you introduce yourself?"

"You boarded my ship, skeleton man. Shouldn't you be the one introducing yourself first?" Luffy asked firmly.

"Ah, you're right! Why, my stomach positively churns at the lack of manners I'm showing. Even if I don't have a stomach any longer! Skull joke!" The skeleton laughed as he tipped his hat, a small thing perched on top of his afro, towards Luffy. "My name is Brook, formally of the Rumber Pirates. And I have indeed imbibed in one of the treasures of the sea, a Devil Fruit. Specifically, the Soul-Soul fruit."

Luffy frowned, his eyes narrowing suddenly. Then without warning, he threw an arm around the skeleton's shoulder and started to move back towards his crew. "Everyone, this is Brook, of the Rumber Pirates. Why does that name sound familiar to me?"

"Yohohoho, I rather doubt that my old bounty poster is anywhere around, so I'm afraid that is probably in your imagination, dear sir," Brook answered, although somewhat startled by how he had tried to pull away from the straw-hat wearing man and made no headway.

"Actually, it's the name of your pirate band that we recognize," Nami said, while the others who had joined the crew after his arrival in the Grand Line looked on in surprise. "Weren't those the pirates that had to leave Laboon behind?"

Sanji nodded, and even Zoro looked thoughtful, while Makino agreed instantly. "Yes, that's the name Crocus gave us, the Rumber Pirates. Did you leave behind a baby island whale, by any chance, Brook?"

Brook stared at them all, his jaw flopping open, and somehow, even the area around where his eyes had been moved, like his eyes were widening in surprise. "Laboon!! But, wait, no, this is coming too quickly," he said, stammering as he stumbled backward. "You all have met Laboon!?"

"Yep. Laboon was doing alright the last time we saw him, although that had more to do with the fact that he had his own dedicated Doctor than anything else."

"I, I see, so you have even met Crocus!" Brook shook his head, laughing again, although he was also trembling with some huge emotion. "W, will wonders never cease. Please, you must tell me more."

"It's about lunchtime. Join us for lunch, and I think a story for a story, right captain?" Sanji asked. *Although how the hell is a skeleton supposed to eat?*

For once, Zoro's mind was following the same line of thought as Sanji's. "Fifty beli says Brook will be able to eat through some Devil Fruit fuckery. Any takers?"

Chopper and Sanji instantly took the swordsman up on the bet. Soon the crew began to make their way to the kitchen where Makino and Sanji went about making drinks and a large lunch while Eve dropped the anchors without asking, and Franky and Luffy used rope to tie the ghost ship to their own. The others regaled Brook with the tale of how they had met Laboon, the first adventure they'd had upon entering the Grand Line, with the giant whale eating their ship and the two mercenaries, one a

disguised princess, trying to kill Laboon for his meat, and Crocus and his odd way of doctoring the giant whale from the inside.

Remembering Vivi, Ranma leaned back, letting the others tell Brook about how Laboon had been smashing his head against the side of the Red Line, wanting to try and find a way back to his crew, and how Luffy had talked him out of it. The captain, though, had his thoughts on the princess. *I wonder how she's doing? Hopefully good, with that Devil Fruit helping her. I just hope our friendship hasn't come to light. Otherwise, she might be targeted by the Wee Gee after our battle in Water 7.*

By the end of the story, Franky was in tears, although he denied it when Zoro called him out on it, shouting out, "Baka, I'm not crying, Baka! I'm just so touched! That whale-bro, so brave and so selfless!"

"As much as Franky is lying, I got to admit, that is one hell of a story," Laki said with a nod.

Luffy came back to the here and now, pointing his fork at the skeleton. "Yep. And now, I think it's time for you to share your story, Brook."

Finishing his plate, the skeleton let out a long burp and found himself on the floor, his head ringing from a kick from Sanji and Makino, who spoke over one another in their ire. "Mind your manners in front of the ladies!"/"Dead or alive, there is such thing as good manners!"

"Yohohoho, so harsh! You'll have to forgive me. I haven't had a meal as good as that in a skull's age, and I quite forgot my manners hearing your tale of Laboon. Ah! But before I begin my own story, might I ask what kind of panties you ladies are wearing?"

This resulted in yet another beat down while Luffy rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair.

"And stop deflecting," Makino ordered. "Tell us how you came to be the last survivor of your crew. Beyond the obvious Devil Fruit thing, I mean."

"And..." Robin murmured, staring at the skeleton thoughtfully then down at the ground of the kitchen. "Where exactly is your shadow?"

At that, everyone stared in shock, even Luffy going, "What the hell!"

"AAAHHHH VAMPIRE!!!" Chopper shouted, hiding behind Zoro once more.

"Don't be ridiculous. What would blood do for a person who's literally all-bones?" Laki scoffed, although she too looked a bit worried.

"Eve, any thoughts on vampires?" Luffy asked.

"Not really. I can see why vampires are scary, although I pity the vampire who tries to attack this crew," Eve answered from her normal place at the far end of the table from the captain's spot.

For the first time, a mouth and hand had appeared there to partake of the food, although Eve still wasn't up to even manifesting her head just yet. *Heads are trickier than arms, I guess, Luffy thought. Or maybe that was a step too far with a foreigner aboard?*

“Yet the question must be asked. I have never seen anyone without a shadow before, and I do not think it is a natural occurrence,” Robin rejoined.

At the question of this shadow, Brook became serious. He sat up, pushed himself to his feet, righted his chair, and sat down in it, slowly intoning, “That is two very different questions, I’m afraid. And the second is far scarier than the first.”

He paused, sipping at his tea delicately. Watching this, everyone around him wondered, not for the first time in this meal, where the heck the food was actually going. It wasn’t just falling out of him again, or else everyone would have stopped him from eating in the first place. This meant that Zoro’s bet was spot on: Devil Fruit fuckery at its finest was at work here, which earned the swordsman a hundred Beli and the annoyed looks from the cook, which he valued somewhat more.

After waiting a moment, Brook began. “We Rumber had made a name for ourselves, and many of our fellows even had bounties. Small ones for the Grand Line, but there were many of us, and not one individual stood out among the rest, not even me or our captain. But evidently, it was enough for the Marines to come after us. We beat them off but were easy pickings for another pirate band. One who used poison in their weapons. We defeated them with some losses but the poison, the poison we could not do anything about, as our Doctor lay dead. All of us slowly succumbed to it, one after another. Only my own life was spared, and even then, it took my soul time to find my body once more because of our ship drifting. By which time I was as you see me now, a skeleton. A skeleton with a soul!”

Looking around the table and having heard about Laboon from the crew in front of him, Brook hesitated, then reached up to his afro. Tugging on it, the afro did not move, but the top of the skull did, causing shouts of shock and exclamations from everyone there. Reaching in, Brook pulled out a dial.

Laki stared at it, nodding her head. That’s a Tone Dial. It’s used to record noises and voices.”

“Yohohoho, indeed, angel-chan. I thought that you would recognize it, given your wings. Considering the two sides of the conflict there, our stop in Sky Island was somewhat fraught, but we wound our way through and bought a few of these. Not many, but a few. On this, is the last song the Rumber Pirates ever sang. A memory within a shell, within a skull. YOHOHOHO...” Brook quietly intoned, clicking the top of the shell.

A second later, the song ‘Binks sake’, a perennial pirate favorite, began to emanate from the dial before Brook turned it off. “The rest, I will only play in the presence of Laboon. Until then, it is going to stay sealed.”

With that, Brook reopened his skull and placed the dial within. “The same could perhaps be said about my afro. I remember that Laboon always liked it. Now, with my body like this, this afro is the only thing that could allow Laboon to recognize me. It’s truly a precious thing to me because of that. Because only with the afro and the dial can I keep our promise to Laboon.”

Franky was crying once more, and Nami and Sanji joined him while Laki looked like she was sniffing. Zoro, Luffy, Makino and Robin all smiled at the idea while Chopper bawled his head off with Franky. “Dammit, that is a man’s romance right there! Decades after, both of you, both skeleton-bro and whale-bro are dreaming of meeting one another, keeping their promises!”

Luffy nodded, allowing the rest of the crew to get over the response to it, while Brook quietly played his violin in the background, chuckling to himself. When the tears began to stop, though, Luffy spoke up, pointing it from Brook again. "And your shadow? What happened there? Unless that's part of your Devil Fruit too? But you said it was a more dangerous tale."

"Indeed it was. You see, my shadow, it was stolen. Stolen by a most dangerous, most horrible man! He uses this area, the fog, as his stomping ground." Brook answered, shaking his head.

"And is there a name for this scary person?" Robin questioned while Luffy started to smile. He could sense adventure here, a challenge waiting to.

"No! Do not ask me that. My friends, your ship is magnificent, but this is my fight. If I am to ever leave this area, to ever see the light of day again, I must reclaim my shadow. But, I cannot ask you all to.."

"Fuck that," Luffy growled, banging one hand on the table for emphasis. "Laboon bears my pirate flag, remember? That means helping you meet him again is something I'm almost obligated to do. Besides, I was going to ask you to join our crew. We still need a musician after all."

Even Chopper and Laki, the least enthused about the undead, nodded their heads at that. Brook stared at them all, then began to snuffle himself before shaking his head and trying for several minutes to talk them out of it.

But Luffy was adamant, and even though she was worried, even Nami knew there were some things Luffy wasn't going to bend on. "Just tell them already! So long as it isn't a Yonko or someone at that level, I don't think Luffy's going to bat an eye."

"A Yonko, no. But have you ever heard of the Shichibukai? My friends, I cannot possibly ask you to fight such a one as him!"

Nami and Makino's worries instantly crystalized, and they turned instantly to Luffy, shaking their fists in his face. Neither wanted to tangle with another Shichibukai and his crew, not after Alabasta. "Don't you do it!"

But Luffy ignored them, looking over at Sanji and Zoro, who grinned back at him. All three men then turned to Brook, leaning forward. "Tell us more about this warlord, and where can we find him?"

Scene break

"The ship with the Straw Hat's flag is deep into the Florian Triangle, master. But..."

"Spit it out, Hildon! Anything to get this over with and Kuma and Hancock out of my hair," Gecko Moria barked.

While Hancock snorted at that and Kuma simply looked on, Hildon, a rather obese flying bat-person who served as Moria's eye in the sky, bowed towards his master. "They have since begun to move deeper into the fog and should be within Thriller Bark soon. Unfortunately, something has gone wrong already. They, they have met with the singing swordsman, Sir!"

Gecko Moria growled angrily at that information that the singing swordsman was going to be among them. Several years ago, the singing swordsman, an odd skeleton creature, had created a near

disaster among his zombies, having figured out one of their weaknesses was salt. Alone he was no real threat, obviously, except to the wild zombies out in the woods of Thriller Bark. Those were the lowest of the low in terms of the zombies that Moria could call upon. But, it was a complication he didn't want to deal with.

Looking over at his two so-called allies, Moria fought back a snarl, letting only a faint smear appear on his face. Kuma, he hated, seeing him like a dog of the World Government. Moria didn't know what hold they had over him, but it was obviously strong as Kuma did everything the World Government asked of him without hesitation. And as for Boa Hancock, Gecko Moria still remembered when they had clashed in the New World and when he had been lost. *Her shadow would make a magnificent puppet! But I need to wait for the most opportune moment to strike. And until then, she and her fellow Amazons can be a help here.*

The first report of the Straw Hat's ship had reached them around thirty minutes ago and had brought both of them from Hancock's ship, where they had retreated over the past week. The nature of that ship and the concerns about its possible firepower had been discussed and eventually set aside. The fog's nature and the fact that not even Kenbunshoku could detect zombies would let them trap the enemy as per normal. *After that...*

"I think it's time to plan this out," Moria growled, angry at the necessity but unwilling to just ignore the fact that these two could help him and his forces tremendously. "The singing swordsman will prepare them for some of my forces and the reality of my island to a certain extent. Not everything, he's never been inside my mansion, and our tricks and traps within should still work to a certain degree, as should Hogback and his deceptions. The same goes for Perona's powers and Absalom and his invisibility."

"You wish us to attack on the heels of the enemy entering the mansion? Build on the surprise," Kuma announced.

Moria nodded tightly, looking over at Hancock. "Perhaps some of your troops should also be stationed with the zombies within the mansion? Or, cutting off any retreat back to their ship."

"I will agree to that second point. I would also recommend that you use your follower Perona's powers at range from the start. Her abilities should come as a tremendous surprise to the enemy, and let us start winnowing their numbers. But I will keep the majority of my crew far back, so we are not detected. The marine's reports about this Straw Hat Luffy having Kenbunshoku concerns me, but his range can't be all that far." Hancock announced.

"And you, Kuma?" Moria asked, wondering what plan Kuma would create and somewhat annoyed with Perona. He had hoped to keep her abilities secret for now, but Perona had struck up a friendship with a few of Hancock's Amazons and shared some of her ghostly abilities with them. Not all, thankfully, but enough that the Negative Hollow attack would not come as a surprise to Hancock when Moria turned on her.

"I will wait with the Amazons, for now. I will move in to combat either the captain or the first mate when it becomes advantageous to do so," Kuma answered.

Gecko nodded and then relayed orders that moved the massive ship *Thriller Bark*, which was as large as a good-sized island, forward, looking to trap the enemy. The Amazon Pirates and Kuma retreated, moving to the far end of the massive island for now. No hint of what was really waiting for the Straw Hats here on Moria's artificial island would be allowed. Not until it was all too late...

End chapter