

Ain't Japanese.

Hey all, sorry this took so long. I added another 5000 words, and RL kicked Tomon in the nads, so it took him a while to finish looking over the chapter. This should have come out last month, but I didn't want to post it until he had it back to me. Regardless, I hope you like the finished product.

This has been edited by Tomon and Hiryo. Bits of it have even been Grammarly checked. Beyond that, I hope any small mistakes don't bother your enjoyment of the chapter. I should have Horse for the Force, the winner of this month's poll (sorry it didn't appear here on fanfic, be on the lookout for September's soon) up tomorrow.

Chapter 35: Stirring the Pot

Luffy woke up the next morning early. He was one of the early risers on the crew, able to get up and move without needing to be kicked out of bed or, in the case of Robin, pulled from her latest book. Many a time had stayed up reading all night, although to be fair, once she had enough coffee in her, she didn't seem to show any sign of tiredness... from that nighttime activity, anyway.

Stepping out of the guest room he and Robin had been given last night because Luffy was one of the two captains, Luffy was forced to hop over or sneak around several still-sleeping crew members. Many had to sleep out in the hallway, Shakky not having enough space in her place to put them all in the actual rooms, regardless of what kind of room it was. Brook was out here with Zoro, the skeleton's snores performing an odd falsetto accompaniment to Zoro's deeper tones, with Chopper and Marigold. Nami and the rest had at least gotten a chunk of the floor in the sitting area and attic in Shakky's house. *I wonder if he was serious about helping me wake the rest of them up once the crew doesn't have any passengers to worry about?*

Brook had mentioned that idea a time or two, and his music had always helped soothe or bolster spirits when the crew or their disparate groups of passengers had to work. He had even mentioned something about having done the same thing for his previous crew.

Mind you, waking people up with a discordant violin song right by their heads is a bit much, even for me, Luffy reflected, heading down the stairs from the series of second-story rooms he and his crew had been given by Shakky. Shakky seemed to really like them, and what little they had shared about their plans going forward had set her to smiling for the rest of the night. While she didn't seem the sort, Shakky really wanted to stick it to the World Government in her own sardonic way.

The fact that the octopus guy and Hancock knew her, is a mark in Shakky's favor, too. Luffy wondered where that connection came from but decided not to question things. If Hancock wanted to share, she would. Shakky hadn't, which was probably a sign.

Stepping into the bar, Luffy heard the sounds of Sanji in the kitchen on the other side of the thin doorway leading from the back of the bar. With a new lady to impress, and of course, wanting to continue to impress the crew's ladies, that was probably a given. What surprised Luffy was finding Hancock waiting for the meal at the main bar, sipping a cup of tea. *This is the first time I've seen her awake in the morning without some big issue getting her up and moving.*

He nodded to the other captain, who smiled back at him, gesturing to the cook in the kitchen. "I had thought to cook this morning. It has been quite some time but seeing Shakky again made me think of it. She taught my sisters and me how to cook after we..." she paused, gesturing with her hand to indicate her back and the mark there.

Luffy nodded, showing he understood as he sat next to her, asking if Luffy would like some tea. Remembering the conversation he had with Robin back during their after-alliance date, the pigtailed pirate found himself blushing a bit, his eyes trailing down Hancock's body before he could really stop himself. *Robin can't be right, can she? Yeah, attracted to her, that's easy to see. You'd have to be blind not to be. Or gay, I'm not judging. Love, though? That is entirely different.*

Before he could say anything aloud on that topic or something else, Hancock spoke again, looking up at him from where she had just poured a cup of tea into a second mug. "You might like this blend, though I don't know what subtle taste Shakky puts in her tea. She's never told us," the Pirate Empress announced, sounding somewhat aggrieved. "But it is just slightly different than any other and quite flavorful."

Luffy took a sip and smiled, the memory taking him back to Alabasta and a certain blue-haired young woman. "Actually, I know it. I don't suppose you've ever been to Alabasta, have you?" Hancock shook her head, saying that she hadn't, although Sanji and the other had told her and the other Kuja bits of the adventure the Straw Hats had there. Luffy nodded, cheerful as he tapped the side of the cup. "They have a kind of cactus there that looks almost like a red and pink flower with spikes, and the petals have this kind of milk within it, called the Desert's Perfume or something? Anyway, while we were staying in the palace, Princess Vivi gave us some tea with that in it."

At that, Luffy frowned, shaking her head. "I have to wonder what will happen with her and some of our other friends we've made both along the way and back in East Blue when the WeeGee realize how big an enemy they've made of us. Of course, Vivi will probably be able to handle herself," he mused, snickering.

"Why ever are you certain of that?" Hancock asked. "While I believe that Alabasta is part of the WeeGee in good standing, that will not stop them from taking vengeance upon this Vivi if it becomes clear that she had helped you. It wouldn't be the first time the World Government struck at a pirate's families or friends."

Luffy shrugged. "Unless they send in a vice admiral or higher to do it, I think Vivi and her family will be able to beat them off. And if they do, I suppose Alabasta can become the second island protected by my name," Luffy grinned wolfishly.

"Again, why are you certain the Alabastan princess will prove so formidable? The place is extremely important because it is a crossroads between two routes through the Grand Line, and the marines will not like the idea of helping you. They will almost certainly move against her in force... although admittedly perhaps not to the extent of sending a vice admiral or higher."

"Heh. Alabasta's a desert kingdom, which is why Crocodile liked the place and wanted to take it over." *Above and beyond the poneyglyph with the design of Pluton on it, but even with Hancock, there are things I'm not willing to share.* "His Devil Fruit gave him power over sand." Luffy waited, but Hancock showed no surprise at that, and he went on. "Anyway, as you might know when you kill a Devil Fruit user..."

"The Devil in the fruit escapes and finds a similar fruit randomly. Random, but within a certain amount of distance, not closest," Hancock replied. "I was told by old Nyon after my sisters, and I showed her we had eaten Devil Fruits. Although the source of our odd abilities isn't common knowledge even among my crew."

"Right. Well, afterward, Robin could find the fruit the Devil's spirit fled to. My crew debated on it for a while, but none of them wanted the sand powers, so I left it there for Vivi to take."

That simple, bland comment stunned Hancock. Logia fruits were extremely hard to come by, and the Sand logia had some deadly attacks that made it extremely dangerous. And Luffy had just given it away? "I want to make certain I understand this. Not only did you not fight Crocodile simply because he was there, but you left a logia-type devil fruit to Princess Vivi? A young woman who you had known but a few weeks at most, and you left one of the stronger types of Devil Fruits to her without any demand for recompense?"

Luffy nodded, then stated sententiously, "Friendship is one of the most powerful feelings in existence, you know."

Hancock stared, then began to chuckle. "Well, if that is what I have to look forward to as your ally, I can only say that I am glad of it. But how did you meet Vivi in the first place? I haven't heard the start of that adventure from your crew."

Chuckling, Luffy explained how Vivi had gone undercover within Baroque Works and how they all met while she was away from the desert kingdom. From there, he described the role Vivi had in the adventures from then on and how she had bonded with the crew."

As he spoke, Hancock watched Luffy thoughtfully. Whenever Luffy mentioned Vivi, a look in his eyes made Hancock wonder if perhaps Luffy had once had feelings for the young princess or vice-versa. *Regardless, Robin was there throughout, and Robin is still with the crew, not the princess. It is doubtful that anything happened between them, and indeed, I might be too sensitive to such things right now, given my issues with Luffy.*

When she asked Luffy to elaborate on how he dealt with the king of the Drum Kingdom, Hancock's loud burst of laughter brought Sanji out of the kitchen. "Mellorine, Hancock-sama, do you wish to have breakfast now, or should I keep working on everyone else's...."

Sanji's heart-shaped eye at serving Hancock breakfast one-on-one instantly fractured and disappeared as he stared at Luffy, sitting next to Hancock, enjoying a cup of tea. "What the hell, Captain! What do you think you're doing talking up Hancock when you already have the delectable Robin!?"

"I was telling her about our adventure with Vivi from start to finish, Sanji. Calm down, dude!" Luffy said with a laugh, hoping to stop Sanji from working himself into a tizzy. *You'd think Sanji wouldn't mind since I know he at least slept with Aphelandra and Margarete after the Alliance party. I don't honestly know if he actually did anything, but they did come out of the same room, so Sanji got at least a double helping of cuddles, and I think they are both developing feelings for him, even if they don't know what to do about it. But his first reaction to others flirting with any of the girls is still to get angry for some reason rather than be happy with what he's got.*

"The story has been fantastic, especially how you were able to slay the marine captain turned pirate, Gasparde. Well done. As for breakfast, I will wait to eat with the rest of our group," Hancock added, wishful to get rid of the cook and go back to conversing with Luffy one-on-one.

"Your praise makes my heart sing with joy!" Sanji answered, dancing in place. "Please wait a bit for breakfast then, Hime of my heart!"

"Take your time. The others seem to have decided to sleep in. And I think we all deserve a good breakfast, yeah?" Luffy nearly ordered. "We've got a full day ahead of us."

Once Sanji returned to the kitchen, Hancock decided to change the subject, her tone shifting from the convivial and friendly tone it had been when speaking to Luffy to somewhat concerned. I am still uncertain about this whole plan of yours. While I understand your desire to muddy the local waters and take advantage of the confusion of our enemy, you're putting a lot on your shoulders and those of your first mate. To say nothing of your navigator."

"And this unidentified coating expert of yours, the name of which you, Octo-guy and Shacky still haven't told us," Luffy teased before becoming serious, seeing her face and knowing that she was concerned. "But don't worry about it. This won't be the first time I've tried to use

my curse to go undercover, and we know that they kept the secret of my curse, or else you would have known about it before showing up on Thriller Bark.”

“That is true. Hina kept that secret,” Hancock mused, despite giving up all she knew about your abilities beyond. “But she shared everything else she knew about you and your abilities.”

“Hina is a loyal marine, unfortunately. I knew Hina would have to share a lot of what she saw. But after we saved her and the rest of them from drowning in the White-White Sea, I made Hina and the rest promise they would keep that secret above everything else. Just as much as she honors her duty to the marines, Hina has a sense of her personal honor and will see keeping that secret as payment for the rescue.”

“As for Hina’s crew?” Luffy shrugged. “Hina kept on saying she and her people couldn’t afford to stay around us for long because to a Marine, knowing that pirates are individuals and perhaps not evil can be a problem. It makes the job harder if they see their opponents as people. Which they did.”

“So perhaps your secret is not known to the Marines,” Hancock acknowledged, shaking her head before narrowing her eyes as she looked at Luffy. “You know that once you use your curse form for this plan, the secret will be out, yes? And the marines might realize that Hina had to know about it. You’ll be putting her in an untenable position.”

Luffy shrugged, his expression one of almost callous unconcern. “Well, wouldn’t that be just too damn bad? I might like Hina, but she still gave you all the information she could about my crew, leading to not one but two deadly fights. If we hadn’t gotten lucky, and if both you Shichi folks and the CP9 losers hadn’t been so arrogant, some of my crew might have died. Hina has to pay for that in some fashion.”

Lips quirking, Hancock acknowledged his point before turning the conversation back to their plan going forward. “Regardless, your plan still relies on one point you cannot control. What if the marines decide to just kill Zoro here in the Archipelago?”

Luffy hesitated, then held up his hand, indicating that Hancock had a point. But there was little that Luffy could do about it. “The Marines normally want to make a big show of executing pirates they capture. Since they weren’t willing to try to capture the rest of us alive, they’ll probably make a bigger deal out of capturing him, connect it to the rumors of the rest of the crew being wiped out.”

Even as she conceded that point, Hancock still looked... not worried, not exactly. Her self-control was too much for that, but she was definitely concerned.

A part of Luffy wondered for a second if Hancock was showing concern rather than feeling it for real. After all, until she came out in favor of his crew, if *or rather when*, a traitorous

part of Luffy's mind amended, the breakout came to a full battle. Her connection to him and his crew was minimal. *She could always say she had been tricked, that we had substituted bodies of zombies for our crew or any number of things.*

But that part of Luffy's brain was promptly set upon by the rest of Luffy's head, which knew that Hancock wasn't one to act like that at all. Hancock was too self-confident and, beyond her haughty persona, too honest for such a thing. *Besides, no way in hell would she go back on her own word, turn her back on the alliance we made. With that and our friendship, there's no way in hell Hancock's acting here.* No, Hancock's concerns were real, not for the overall plan but for Luffy himself. This gave more credence to Robin's crazy idea that Hancock had feelings for him.

Moreover, the way she was looking up at him from under her long eyelashes made Luffy's heart go pitter patter, something he was not exactly used to. Robin cared and even showed that before they began dating, but she didn't make an expression of concern so cute it seemed to stab Luffy in the heart.

Impulsively, he set his cup of tea aside for a second. He then reached across and took Hancock's hands, causing Hancock to blush faintly as Luffy smiled at Hancock, a crooked little grin full of warmth despite that. "Don't worry," he soothed. "While I won't be so stupid as to say everything's going to go according to plan, I'm not that dumb. But I trust my ability to roll with the punches. I can for sure react much faster to any trouble that pops up than any marine commander, no matter their rank."

"Besides," Luffy said, gently running a now slightly flickering finger across the back of Hancock's hand, sending tiny, somewhat pleasurable jolts through her hand to the rest of her body. "I've got one trick that no one knows about."

"W, well," Hancock coughed delicately, looking away, her cheeks slightly pinker than they had been a moment before. "I suppose I will have to take your word for it then." This made Hancock look embarrassed, almost shy at Luffy's touch.

But when Luffy made to move his hands away from hers, he instantly found one of her hands gripping his own, and soon, their fingers coiled together where they sat on the top of the bar, causing Luffy to blush in turn. *Oh. So, Robin was right. Well... okay.* Luffy knew that thought was kind of lame, but at the moment, he really couldn't figure out how to respond to this.

Thankfully he didn't have to broach that subject just yet as, after a second, Hancock pulled her hand away, returning it to her cup of tea, rejoining its equally elegant companion. She raised the cup to her lips, taking a sip before moving on to her own role in this plan. "And you are certain that you don't want some of my crew to join yours on your ship? After the past few days, they certainly know enough about how the ship operates to help, and your crew will be without their main source of propulsion," she teased gently.

Luffy shook his head, indicating his own crew would handle it. “Besides, your part in this mission is to be ready to attack if necessary while working with the marines and the other Shichibukai they’ll have gathered. That ain’t gonna make you any friends, so you’ll have to be ready when the marines realize you’ve turned on them. Especially if you’re anywhere near this Blackbeard guy. If he was able to capture Ace, then he’s incredibly powerful, and neither of us has any idea what that power could be.”

Snorting, Hancock waved one hand airily. “Bah, that aspect of the plan is simple enough, although I share your concern about Blackbeard. I haven’t met the man, and Tsuru certainly didn’t make any mention of his powers when she discussed the Thriller Bark operation. But it seems somewhat annoying to me to leave you and your crew to carry the weight of this plan.”

Hancock and her crew would remain here in Shabondy Archipelago with most of the Straw Hats and Eve waiting while Franky built the Kuja a new ship and the Coating expert coated the *Everlasting Resolve*. Once that was done, Hancock and her people would go on their way, while the Straw Hats, bar Franky, would have already followed after their captain in a roundabout kind of way...

“Come to think of it, we haven’t discussed the chain of command. Who will be in charge of your crew while you are away? Before we split off, I mean?” Hancock asked, remembering one point they hadn’t talked about.

But Luffy simply pointed at her with his free hand, snorting in amusement. “You. We just signed an alliance, you have experience leading, and my first mate and I won’t be around, so it just makes sense.”

Hancock was stunned and slowly shook her head. She might have brought up the topic, but to have Luffy say she would be in charge so quickly? “I cannot think of any pirate who would be so willing to allow someone else to lead their crew. Perhaps the various divisions of Whitebeard or one of the other Yonko could switch between crews like that, but even then, they would deal with a lot of rivalry and resentment.”

“Eh, maybe on the Whitebeard front. From the two times I’ve talked to him, he seems like a guy who demands a certain level o’ respect. But Shanks would probably surprise ya,” Luffy demurred.

Hancock admitted the point with a shrug but still shook her head. “Regardless of what airs I put on, I do not consider myself equal to such men, much as that pains me to say aloud. Despite our powers and abilities, we are still only single-crew captains. And captains always guard their prerogatives zealously.”

“Eh, I ain’t really one to care about that kind of thing or being formal, except for really important stuff like our alliance,” Luffy answered, still shrugging the concept away like it didn’t matter. Which, to him, it didn’t.

“Has anyone told you, you are the most non-pirate kind of person to ever fly a Jolly Roger?” Hancock drawled. “There’s being informal, and then there’s being lackadaisical. Most pirates would be concerned about another pirate captain doing some recruiting among their crew, turn the crew against the original captain or would simply prove to be too popular.”

Luffy laughed at that. “Hah. Well, normal crews are just that, crews. The best crews are made of friends and fellow dreamers. If I couldn’t trust my crew to act without me there to crack the whip, they wouldn’t be my crew at all, let alone my friends. My crew knows I will do my damndest to make their individual dreams come true so long as they help me achieve mine in turn. We’re bound by friendship and trust, just like your crew’s bound by your shared society and trust in you.”

Hancock watched him, a blush appearing on her face as the actual topic left her mind for a moment as the Pirate Empress realized that she really liked watching Luffy laugh and smile like that. Indeed, Hancock really just liked being around him. *Good grief, I have it bad.* Yet despite the somewhat sappy thought, Hancock found it somewhat delightful to admit it, even if only to herself.

Seeing the look on Hancock’s face, Luffy fell silent, flushing himself a bit. He suddenly became aware that their legs were touching and they were both almost leaning into one another, their tea going cold on the bar. Hancock also seemed to become aware of that, and she turned her gaze back to the bar, her hands moving around her teacup once more.

The silence continued, both of them feeling the tension between them. At the slight flush to Hancock’s features and the way her eyes kept on flickering between looking at Luffy out of the corner of her eye and then back to her teacup, Luffy realized he would have to make the next move. And after a moment of just looking at her face, Luffy girded his mental loins and began. *Well, here goes nothing.*

Reaching over, Luffy reclaimed her hand, slowly turning Hancock on her barstool to face him as he turned his body in the same direction. “Er, so I, me and Robin, we had a bit of a talk during our little date the other night. A talk about, er well, the fact that maybe you and I, our, our feelings for one another aren’t just friendly?”

God flipping GRAH. I have a girlfriend, I’ve been romantic with her, hell, I flirted with her before we officially got together, Amaterasu’s sake, and I’m stumbling over my words here? But... maybe that’s it? Maybe putting it into words now, before we’ve actually er, kicked open the door physically, makes it harder? Luffy wondered.

Hancock blushed, looking down at her lap for a moment, nodding, and once more, Luffy had the urge to clutch at his chest as his heart went ‘doki doki’ like in those girly animes he’d been forced to watch a few times. *A sexy woman like Hancock should not be able to just turn that into weaponized cuteness like this! If she can use this power of hers on command, Hancock*

could really try to take over the world, he thought, trying to use humor to keep himself under control.

“Um, well, you could, well, yes,” Hancock stuttered. “I, I did not realize it either until Robin confronted me, but after I got over my annoyance with her rudeness...” she paused as Luffy laughed, and her own lips quirked wryly, aware of her own foibles. With Luffy’s gentle laughter somehow giving her courage, Hancock even made fun of it, throwing her hair back with one hand and saying mock-haughtily. “Hmmp, can you believe that Robin got my traitorous sisters to agree with her? The nerve of them!”

“Yeah, well, Robin’s pretty perceptive,” Luffy answered, his laughter subsiding into a gentle smile, which Hancock somehow knew was directed at her and founded by his affection for Robin. “And she pointed out that you and I didn’t just treat one another like friends but actually seemed to be building a, a deeper connection?”

Licking her lips, Hancock nodded. “I, yes. They, they all pointed out that some of our interactions were quite... not flirtatious, exactly, but certainly within striking distance of it. Once Robin and my sisters had pointed it out, I could not unsee it, and, and that opened the floodgates for me to, to...” she paused once more, breathing in deeply before taking the plunge. “To realize that the admiration I felt for you had shifted into something. I realized how alike in many ways the two of us are. And I, I see much of you Luffy that I admire, and like, and, even find desirable...”

She nearly squeaked the last word, looking up at him through her long eyelashes even as she tried to look as if she wasn’t. She didn’t quite pull it off, but Luffy had to admire her courage for saying that all aloud in the first place. He knew that Hancock didn’t come from a society that really gave weight to softer emotions.

And her courage demanded a similar response. *Get me ye behind me, shades of Nerima! Come to my aid, my time flirting with Robin.* An internal snort at how being so open with his emotions would have never occurred to him in his last life, Luffy began, trying to call upon his new life’s experiences with Robin. “I, I can’t deny that there is a connection between us. Hell, thinking about it, I had begun to admire and even like you while you were fighting on Thriller Bark.” He smiled, winking at Hancock. “Like I told Robin, I got a type, and its fifty girls.”

Hancock giggled at that. “I had also come to admire you during our fight. In fact, I was struck with the thought that I would prefer to fight alongside you rather than with those I was working with several times,” she added drolly. “Although that might have just as much to do with my fellow Shichibukai as you.”

The two of them shared a laugh before Luffy sobered somewhat. “But I won’t leave Robin for you, Hancock. I, I admit that I shouldn’t have even really let myself feel this connection between us given my relationship with her, but while I won’t say those feelings

aren't there, I **won't** set Robin aside. She, she told me that you told her you wouldn't want that, but I... I need to hear that from you too."

He held up a hand before Hancock spoke. "And I don't mean that you won't try to push her out of the relationship. But are you really okay with entering a relationship with a guy who's already in one? A guy who won't be able to give you all the attention you deserve, who can't join your crew... er, for more reasons than the fact he is a guy in the first place, anyway."

Her lips quirking, Hancock observed, "You ended a bit weakly there, Luffy. Regardless, as you ask, I will say it plain: I don't need or desire you to throw Robin aside. Indeed, if you were willing to do so, I think that would bother me greatly." It would show a lack of commitment that she would be greatly annoyed by. "Indeed, I have more trouble with the 'guy' aspect of that than your existing relationship."

Well, that was easy, Luffy reflected, fighting back a sweatdrop at how the biggest hurdle between them getting together had been so easily dealt with. *I will never understand women. I mean, I knew that Robin finds her attractive too, so there's a chance of something there too, but I didn't think Hancock had any thoughts in that area.*

But just because Hancock said she was fine with Robin and Luffy remaining together didn't mean there weren't other issues to address. "Okay, that makes me happy, But what about the rest of it? Like I said, I won't be able to give you as much attention as I can Robin. That's just a fact," he said, half-apologetically, half-bluntly. "You're the captain of your crew, to say nothing about the rest of your people, and I'm captain of mine. While we might be allies and your island is under my protection, it's, well, we won't be able to spend as much time together as I can with Robin. Not unless things go really, really wrong."

Luffy paused then, and Hancock smiled, shaking her head ruefully. "Luffy, while this will, admittedly be the first time I enter into a, a relationship with a man, I rather think that some distance might be helpful. Do I want your attention? Yes, both um, both emotionally and er, physically. But I don't need it all the time. Indeed, remember, I have my own duties, above and beyond leading my crew. So long as you give me what attention you can and..." she blushed. "And our relationship continues to, to grow, then that is... is good enough for me."

Flushing slightly at words left unsaid there, Luffy nodded slowly. "I... okay. I mean, if you're so certain this is what you want, I'm willing to try it too. You're um, you're too damn attractive inside and out for me not to. So, yeah, let's see where this goes."

Hancock blushed, looking away coyly, showing her new weaponized cuteness once more, but the way her eyes flicked down to Luffy's lips indicated what she was thinking. Feeling his own gaze dropping to Hancock's lips, Luffy decided to push things forward a bit. Raising his hands, he touched her shoulder, trailing his fingers from her cloth-covered shoulder up to her neck and cheek, where he gently cupped her face. She reciprocated, trailing her hand up Luffy's

side and then further up and around until she was running her fingers through his hair, biting her lip lightly once more.

Then they were both leaning in, and their lips pressed together in a kiss. It was a remarkably chaste and far more tender kiss than Luffy would've expected from Hancock, given her statement about having been in relationships. Instead, she seemed almost shy even as they kissed, although she got into it quickly, a happy hum of some kind coming from her as they slowly deepened the kiss. Then as Luffy leaned forward further, Hancock gently opened her mouth.

Soon tongues began to wound around one another, bringing a moan that Luffy took as encouragement even as he lost himself in the sensation. A traitorous portion of his mind began to observe that kissing Hancock was both somewhat similar to and different from kissing Robin, even going so far as to note the differences. Hancock's lips were a tiny bit thinner, her tongue a bit thicker, a bit more active, although Robin was also slightly submissive in terms of kissing, preferring to let Luffy dominate the kiss as she concentrated on using her hands. Hancock seemed to be getting further into the kiss as it went on, pressing Luffy's tongue back into his mouth. Hancock tasted like honeysuckle and cherries on top of the tea. Robin tasted like coffee, oranges, violet and cinnamon.

As Luffy was trying to stop his mind from making such comparisons, his hands had begun to move without any orders from his brain. The hand cupping Hancock's face moved to the back of her neck, caressing and stroking, his fingers moving through her hair lightly. The other hand, which had been holding Hancock's, slid up her arm and under, caressing her side. From there, it moved around Hancock's side before gently pushing at her back, bringing Hancock up out of her seat and forward until she began to lean into his chest. Hancock moved with him, sliding onto Luffy's lap.

It was at that moment that things began to go wrong. From Hancock's perspective up until this point, kissing Luffy had been very nice, but nothing she hadn't done with previous female lovers. She had also gotten used to seeing his muscles, and feeling Luffy's them twitch and shift under her hands was very pleasant. But Luffy was still a man, much like the Tenryubito who had owned her and her sisters when they were younger. And when she moved into Luffy's lap, she felt his rising erection against her rear.

At that moment, Hancock had a violent flashback to her time as a slave. The memory of how her first master had decided to enforce his possession of her superimposed itself over the present moment. How he had grabbed her, pulled her into his lap and...

Instantly Hancock began pulling away, her hands becoming covered with armor technique, as her eyes flew wide, and she gasped in breath for a roar of fury and fear.

But Luffy didn't try to fight her movement. He had felt her sudden tremor and had instantly pulled back, releasing Hancock from his embrace. That action and the conciliatory look

on Luffy's face let Hancock regain control of herself. "I'm, I'm sorry! I didn't think, I didn't think I would have that reaction! But the moment I felt your chest, your, your..."

She glanced down at Luffy's lap, where his natural reaction had risen in his pants, and Luffy nodded solicitously. "Yeah, sorry, er, that kind o' thing is sort of hard to control. But I should've figured there might be some issues here since I knew about your issues with guys. After all, I doubt you've ever talked to a Head Shrinker."

"Head Shrinker?" Hancock asked, responding to Luffy's good humor with a tremulous smile of her own. "What is that supposed to mean? Is it some kind of activity perpetrated by primitive people, and if so, why do you think I would go and see one?"

"A Head Shrinker's a psychologist. They're someone who tries to fix people's minds when they are faced with mental trouble. Things like cravings or fears of heights or other things. I've always figured that they are a kind of hit-or-miss, really. Some are good, some are bad. But it might have helped you deal with your issues with men."

"I have never heard of that at all, and I doubt that I would have trusted any if I had known regardless. Old Elder Nyon tried to help my sisters and me through it, but we all have flashbacks occasionally. Not often, but they are severe when I do. But thank you, Luffy. I, I was certain that I wanted to give a relationship between us a real try before that, but unless this scared you off, it has convinced me even further. Your reaction helped me to calm down," finished Hancock shyly while slightly lowering her head.

Luffy smiled at that, then leaned in, but instead of kissing her on the lips, which Hancock might not have been ready for just yet after her earlier freakout moment, he gave her a kiss on the nose, winking at her as he pulled back. "It's not a problem, Hancock. I'm never gonna push you or want to make ya uncomfortable, okay? Whatever ya need, I'll try to help the best I can." Luffy held Hancock's gaze until she nodded and caressed her cheek tenderly. Seeing her calm down further, Luffy's lips quirked wryly. "And I ain't exactly unused ta dealing with flashbacks and trauma myself, although I would never say my issues are as bad as yours. Still, remind me ta tell ya how I developed a hatred and fear of little furry devil things. You'll at least get a good laugh out of it."

"Wait, furry devil things? What are those?"

"Yeah, you call 'em c, c, cats," Luffy ground out as if the word itself was painful for him.

Hancock was just about to question him further on that score, intrigued by the tone of voice he was using when above them noises began indicating that Robin and the others were waking up. The two of them looked at one another, and then Luffy was leaning back away from Hancock, and she moved to put a bit more distance between their bar stools, even as she reached for the teapot. "More tea?"

The first down the stairs, Robin paused in the entryway into the bar, looking at the two individuals already awake and waiting for the rest of the combined crew. Despite the distance between Hancock and Luffy at the moment, she somehow knew that something had happened. A flash of jealousy went through her, despite knowing this was a possibility and having given Luffy the go-ahead to try and speak to Hancock. But despite that, the jealousy was there.

Yet it dissipated instantly when she saw Luffy become aware of her even before she entered the room, looking up as if he heard her footsteps. He smiled at her, the same tender, loving smile she had gone to bed with him wearing the night before. *That's right. Whatever happens between Luffy and Hancock, Luffy will always see me first.* Now smiling, Robin leaned in to kiss Luffy, which he returned happily.

After a few seconds of Zoro's grumble of 'oy, no PDA', Robin and Luffy pulled back, and Robin looked over at Hancock, wondering if her own jealousy would rear her head. Robin only gave the idea that it wouldn't a 35% to 40% chance if she was being honest. Yet Hancock simply nodded at her, one hand coming up to slowly rub against Hancock's lips, glancing at both of them with a faint flush on her face, her head cocked to one side.

At that point, Robin's mind went down the same road as Luffy's had earlier. *Someone as sexy as Hancock being so cute is against the natural laws of the world!*

As that thought crossed her mind, Robin wanted to smack herself but didn't. It wouldn't be elegant, and she decided to ignore the image that thought had brought into being based around the term 'sexy' in relation to Hancock. Robin really did not want to go down that road at the moment.

Nami, Zoro and the rest moved around Robin, with Shakky among them, smiling cheerily. Sanji had convinced her he could handle the cooking for them while they stayed, and she had slept in gleefully that morning. Nami walked beside Shakky, pointing at a map of the Archipelago Shakky had given the night before, chattering to the woman cheerfully.

She instantly moved between the rest of the group as Makino hopped up over the counter and headed into the kitchen to help bring out the food, laying out the map. "So, here are the most important points for our plans going forward..."

Later, after breakfast, Makino had Luffy pull out of his ki space a lot of various cosmetics and other supplies she had gathered throughout their journey. Once everything was done, the former bartender turned pirate gunner turned to the others. "All right, people, it's time for me to make you pretty. Brook, Zoro, you're excused for this part. Chopper, transform, and you too, Luffy."

"Ugh, I am very, very glad that my part in this means I don't have to go through this," Zoro muttered, shaking his head as he watched Sanji become the first one to be subjected to Makino's tender mercies.

“Not the hair, not the hair, please, Makino-chwan!”

“Yes, the hair Sanji! Not only the color but the hairstyle has to change. Ugh, will you sit... Robin, hold him still!” Makino growled. Sanji had sat down in front of the stylist willingly, only to nearly freak out when she began.

“Gladly,” Robin answered, sipping her coffee with one hand and using her powers with a gesture from the other. Hands appeared all around Sanji, tying him in place while two other hands held a basin under the back of his head where he leaned back in a chair.

“Yohohohoho, I am wondering exactly what Sanji-san is hiding under his hair. Is there a secret to his other eye that we don’t know about? I confess I have yet to see it since I have come aboard, even in the morning when he has yet to do his hair,” Brook questioned.

“Hmm... I have not seen it either. Indeed, Cook-san might not even have an eye at all. Perhaps it is just a blank space? Or perhaps some leprous growth that will terrify all who see it?” Robin murmured, causing Hancock and her sisters to look at her in surprise. They hadn’t had a taste of Robin’s odd brand of humor.

“GAH, so scary, Robin!” Whereas Nami had yet to get used to it. Yet even so, she, Laki and Zoro all moved forward, looking interested, while Robin’s description of what could have been there had caused Camie to faint in Hachi’s arms. The Octopus man watched on, ‘Nyu-ing’ quietly to himself as he wondered what the Straw Hats were going to do.

Luffy, who had seen Sanji’s other eye back on the Baratie, didn’t say anything, somewhat amused to realize he was the only one who seemingly had done so. *Weird, but I’ll put Zoro down to not being that observant of other guys when swords aren’t involved. Nami though... I am so going to tease her about this later.*

“Gah, even, even the prettiest of roses have most deadly thorns,” Sanji whimpered in response to Robin’s words, his head held still by two more conjured hands.

Yet to the surprise of the majority of the crew, Sanji’s hidden eye wasn’t at all unusual. It was the same as his other eye, so there didn’t seem to be any real reason for his complex about his normal hairstyle. That was something of a letdown to the rest of the crew.

Moments later, Luffy returned from the kitchen in his female form, her hair now loose, bouncing off the back of her neck in loose ringlets. “Yo, Makino, you want me to do anything or just keep the old ‘Ranko’ look?”

“Keep the old look, we might do something a little different with your hair, and we should add a new set of pistols, maybe a sword. Remember you need to be recognizable as Ranko of East Blue,” Makino answered, not looking up from where she was mixing something

into the water basin behind Sanji's head. "Your clothing is in the bag marked with a green stripe."

Luffy thanked her, then excused herself to head upstairs. Robin watched her for a moment, then looked at Hancock, one eyebrow cocking inquiringly. The other woman blushed, looked away, then looked back and nodded firmly. Robin leaned forward, whispering, "And are we going to have issues now that you have... tasted the forbidden fruit, so to speak?"

"No. I will honor my words to you and to Luffy, Robin. Yes, I really want to see where it leads, but I will not try to force him to leave you or anything foolish like that. To use another analogy, I would rather have a piece of the pie in peace than argue and lose my eating privileges." Both women looked at one another, then laughed, shaking their heads as one at the number of different analogies Hancock had used there. The two of them might never be close as either was to Luffy, but perhaps there was room for friendship at least, so long as they could keep arguments and jealousy to a minimum.

Soon after, Bounty Hunter Ranko came back down the stairs. She was now dressed in the same outfit she had worn when she turned over Buggy the Clown for his bounty.

Brook looked up at the redhead from where he had been composing an ensemble for himself. He would be going with 'Ranko' as her bounty hunting partner. "Yohohohoho, Captain-san, you look amazing. But can I ask you a serious question: may I see your panties?"

"Perverted skeleton, stop asking that!" Nami growled while Laki smashed Brook upside the head sending him to the floor.

"Meh, I ain't about to flash ya," Luffy laughed. "Still, in this skirt, a single high kick will give you a show. Just remember, if you look away from your own fight to look, I charge in humiliating training exercises later on. Ask Sanji if ya want to have an idea of what I mean."

"Ah, Luffy, so scary! Nami, so scary!" the skeleton chuckled as he got to his feet.

"Well, I'm done over here, folks," Makino announced minutes later. "What do you all think?"

Everyone turned and stared, fascinated at the change Makino had wrought on Sanji. His hair was now a much lighter shade of blonde and spiked up, revealing his eyes and pouting, doleful expression. His eyebrows had been plucked, shortening the curl to a bare mark above the eye. She had also changed his shirt into a bright Hawaiian one with a red tie.

"...Well, I gotta say, he sure doesn't look like Sanji anymore. Nice job," Laki murmured, snickering at how listless and washed-out Sanji looked as he stood up from the chair. "What's the matter, Sanji? I thought you'd enjoy having Makino run her fingers through your hair?"

Sanji continued to pout, muttering about how cruel Makino was, but Makino ignored him, gesturing Nami over. The younger girl skipped forward with a grin while Luffy gestured Chopper over to him. "Come on, Chopper. While Nami gets the professional service, you'll have to deal with the novice."

Having changed into his Heavy Point form, Chopper was soon outfitted to look like a normal human, complete with pantaloons and a loose shirt that covered his body from neck to foot. Shoes were also provided, while Luffy had found a mask for him to wear, the sort doctors or sick people on some islands wore to help hide the rest of his face.

Chopper wouldn't be part of the main plan. Instead, he and Laki would go with Camie and Hachi to provide a nearby backup source in case Nami and her team needed an extraction.

Or, that was the ostensible reason. The real reason was that Chopper and Laki wanted to see Shabondy Park. And Luffy figured the crew owed Camie for the help she had given them to find the Archipelago. And the sea king meat she had, if you squinted, provided them.

Camie also was given a bit of a makeover, as was Hachi, to cover their merman features as much as possible. Meanwhile, Makino finished giving Nami a makeover and then proceeded to give herself, Robin and Laki all different hair colors.

Laki would also be dressed up in some of Nami's clothing for the day, with Luffy, of all people, being put in charge of sizing the clothing to fit. When her wings had been brought up, Shakky had simply shrugged. It turned out that Sky Island folk were not entirely unusual. "She might have to deal with kidnapppers trying to enslave her, but any pretty girl around here has to deal with that kind of thing in the lower-numbered groves.

As she worked, the redhead felt eyes on her and blinked, looking up from where she was working. "What?"

"You know how to sew and resize stuff?" Nami asked for everyone there, one hand running through her now-crimson locks. That and a style change would hopefully be enough to hide her from the marines and others. It was amazing how few pirates thought of doing something like this, and Nami wondered if she could convince her crew to routinely disguise themselves. *Wishful thinking, I know, especially since me and Sanji are only being given disguises just in case we're spotted thanks to the overall plan. But still, a girl can dream, right?*

"Yep. I even know a bit about fashion, not as much as Makino, and most of what I know is about how to stand out, not blend in. But I lived with bandits for years. Do you honestly think any of them knew how to resize stuff for growing boys like me, Ace or even Sabo?" Luffy snorted at her own rhetorical question, waving them off. "And no, I ain't taking requests."

"You seem to be using a, I hesitate to call it a hick accent, but something similar. Certainly a rough mode of speech, Luffy. Is that part of your disguise too?" Robin asked.

“Yep. Ranko’s a rough an’ tumble kind o’ gal,” Luffy answered, laying it on thick as she looked at her lover. “Sorry if that offends ya.”

Robin chuckled at that, holding Luffy’s gaze, looking up and down the redhead’s striking body. Then Sandersonia asked a question and the various makeovers continued.

Nearby, Shakky watched all this with amusement and a drink of something fruity and full of energy made by Sanji for her earlier. *What an interesting bunch, and so eclectic group of personalities too. And I’ve rarely heard of someone able to turn around and make an ally out of an enemy so quickly.*

Her eyes strayed to four people in particular among the crowd in her bar. Hancock, Sanji, Robin, and Laki. And as she did, her thoughts moved down avenues that only Rayleigh and a few others would have expected. But then, few knew that she had once been a renowned information broker or her relationship to the Rayleigh, a man who was much better known by another name and an even more famous appellation.

Even Rayleigh and I didn’t know the real story of that young lady, Shakky thought, looking at Nico Robin. Seeing her as part of the Straw Hats and, more than that, being the captain’s lover was something Shakky hadn’t seen coming... Meeting Robin in the flesh has certainly been eye-opening. As for Sanji, beyond his current washed-out demeanor being just hilarious, he definitely looked like one of the Germa boys. Although his overall attitude certainly doesn’t match that group.

And Hancock... if I didn’t know that love between a man and a woman is still called a sickness on Amazon Lily, I would say she has a crush on the good captain. Even now, watching her sit with her sisters, her eyes stray to Luffy-kun. Beyond that, her decision to take part in this scheme... Luffy and Hancock both might have fooled themselves into thinking that the World Government will be faced with a fait accompli or that if they can make a clean getaway, Hancock’s role in this plan will not be discovered. That’s a pipe dream. Hancock is risking a lot and far more than her own life here. I wonder what Elder Nyon will have to say...

And as for Laki... heh. I’ve seen some of those facial features way too often to not see what’s going on there. Heh. Not that I’m going to say anything that would spoil the show.

Soon, the crew was ready, and Luffy nodded over to her first mate. “You’re up, Zoro. The rest of us will wait two hours, then we’ll start heading off in our various groups.” The redhead exchanged a fist bump with her first mate, the two grinning positively feral smirks. “Cry Chaos and let loose the dogs of war.”

“Heh, aye, aye, Captain,” Zoro answered, walking out the door with a noticeable swagger to his movements.

This ended when Nami's voice came out the door after him, causing him to nearly stumble. "And remember that sheet of paper I gave you, Zoro! You want the numbers twenty-one through thirty. If you can't find your way with that to guide you, you really do have some kind of magic power to get yourself lost!"

"Shut up, you witch!" Zoro barked back, glaring over his shoulder before resolutely turning away, ignoring the japes and jokes from his crew. There was real work to do.

About forty minutes after Zoro left, Hancock and everyone bar Luffy, Brook and Makino left. They would transfer the ship to one of the higher number areas, keeping to the back 'rivers,' the areas between each of the Yarukiman Mangrove. From there, Chopper and the amusement park goers would split off along with Nami's group (Nami, Sanji and Perona,) while Franky and Robin would stay with the Kujas aboard the ship.

After a short discussion, it was determined that Robin's skin color and facial structure just made her too noticeable. That, and of all the crew, only Robin had ever used disguises before to throw the World Government. As good as Makino was, she wouldn't be able to fool spies and agents already on the lookout for someone matching Robin's body type and face with the material they had available.

That meant she was effectively sidelined... for a given value anyway. Nothing was stopping her from using her powers after all. "It will be good practice for me," she had said when that conversation had come up. The fact it would let her and Hancock continue to talk and hammer out the new dynamic between the Pirate empress and Luffy was a bonus.

By early afternoon, Luffy, Makino and Brook left as well, waving farewell to Shabby as she stood in the doorway to her establishment. She watched them go, then turned back inside, snickering to herself. *I wonder how much damage to the Archipelago that lot will do. Still, it should be fun. And when he learns what he just missed, Rayleigh is going to kick himself so hard he might wind up on the moon!*

OOOOOO

While there was no such thing as an actual neutral observer in this world, if there was, it would not have surprised such a creature that as the Straw Hats prepared, the other Supernova were already making trouble. In the morning, this was simple general carousing-type trouble: drunk and disorderly, pushing, shoving, intimidating the locals in the lower numbers of the Archipelago. In one instance, eating at a local restaurant out of business. Basically a typical day in the more lawless portions of Shabondy.

But while Zoro was stumbling around and, rather humiliatingly, needing to use the number system to move around the archipelago, two specific Supernova had come into direct conflict. The damage this caused was not so normal.

Bits and pieces of metal rubble lifted into the air, forming into a large metallic fist crashing down towards Scratchmen Apoo. He was a young man of the Longarm Tribe, which meant he had two elbow joints instead of one. Apoo was also tall, at almost eight and a half feet, and had a rather wide chest. His lower jaw was somewhat wider than the upper half of his face, and Apoo's teeth resembled piano keys so large and wide they seemed to force his jaw into a permanent grin as he stared up at the incoming attack. On his head, Apoo had a pair of orange headphones with his name on either side over his ears, and if Zoro or Robin had been there, they might have felt Apoo's hairstyle was similar to Jabra's, the hair on top of his head pulled back tightly, flowing back into a long ponytail separated by bits of string at various places.

Apoo's wore a Chinese-looking outfit with the Chinese marking for sound at the center of a large flower-like print and a yellow scarf around his waist, coupled with a green rose on his left shoulder. Yellow beatnik glasses completed his look as he danced in place, his hands moving in a form of martial arts flicking in various directions taking full advantage of his multiple elbows, treating his forearms almost as if they were ropes twirling on a stand.

Scratchmen dodged the attack, leaping up into the air and bouncing around the large metal fist via powerful kicks before using his own Devil fruit, the Oto Oto No Mi to attack. "Scratch! Boom! BOOM!"

As his body shifted to the appropriate instrument, his Devil Fruit's other power shifted the noise his body made into a series of attacks, which he launched at the metal fist and at the metal fist's owner. The metallic fist shattered in various places, but the attack against the owner were dodged easily, and the other pirate flew out of the debris of the restaurant where the battle began.

That owner was Captain Eustass Kid, the 315,000,000 Beli Supernova. He was shorter than his opponent at six feet eight, built around the same lines as Zoro, with light skin and bright red hair which he styled into a series of spikes so that it almost looked like his head was on fire. His nose was pointed with little protrusions on both sides. He had dark red-purple-colored lips and fingernails, and his eyes were positively demonic in their orange eye hue as Eustass glared at Apoo.

If Apoo's outfit looked Chinese, Eustass' Kid's outfit looked like something from a heavy metal concert. He had black and yellow lizard-print pants with a red fringe, boots, a blue sash and a green belt fastened by a large circular buckle with a four-leaf clover-like pattern. He also has a slim bandolier with several metal bolts diagonally over his right shoulder and then tied to his waist. There, he kept a dagger, two flintlock guns, and gold bangles around both wrists. On his head, Eustass wore studded, square-shaped goggles and a large captain's coat made of fur over his bare muscular torso, further adorned with spikes on its shoulders like a weird cross between medieval Dark-lord style armor and a woman's fur coat.

Scratchmen simply smirked back at him, his insouciance seeming to infuriate Eustass further. The large metal fist reformed into several dozen smaller ones, which he gestured forward. Apoo attempted to destroy them as they came, but Kid fired two pistols from his regular hands as he did. One bullet struck Apoo in the shoulder, causing him to stumble back but it didn't penetrate.

Regardless of whether they could learn Tekkai or not, any pirate captain who got this far in the Grand Line had proven durable enough that a simple pistol wouldn't put them down. Toughness training was not just something that Luffy had taken from his old life and repurposed for his crew. Life on the Grand Line generally could toughen anyone up. And pirate captains like the Supernovas began on a whole different level already. Unless you were lucky enough to get in a head shot (or perhaps a shot below the belt), regular musket balls would leave bruises, if that.

As Apoo stumbled back, Kid closed the distance, not wanting to let the other pirate continue to use his strange Devil Fruit power. Dropping his pistols, he pulled out a cutlass while directing still more of the metal bits of rubble from the restaurant towards Apoo.

Apoo turned away from the flying knives and other pieces to smack Kid's blade away but couldn't dodge the follow-on kick which took him in the center of his chest. But Apoo moved with the kick, flipping up and away as twin tonfas fell from his long sleeves. He whirled them forward, blocking Kid's cutlass and lashing out as he began to rap to himself. "Yo, yo, why so serious, Kid, yo, yo, Check it out~~~!"

Grimacing, Kid ducked his head under the next blow from his opponent, then smirked as two bits of metal rose from the ground to slice into Apoo's leg. Apoo stumbled, the kitchen knives having just barely missed his tendons, but the next second, Apoo's Devil Fruit power struck back, blasting Kid off his feet. His grimace shifting into a snarl, Kid reformed his massive metal fist, dodging back and through several bystanders who had yet to run away or using the same bits of cover the civilians were already using. Several bystanders were hit, one of them nearly being cut in half by a "SLASH!" but Kid simply grinned as the fist above Apoo continued to grow, pulling metal from several nearby houses, sending the buildings crashing down.

Meanwhile, the two pirate crews were also fighting, with Killer, Eustass Kid's first mate, dominating the fighting. He was a slightly taller man than his captain, with a full-face helmet covering his entire head, with vertical lines of blue and white. The helmet had dozens of small holes and what looked like headphones from North Blue. On his arms, he had large gauntlets made of three interconnected squares, with scythe blades placed on small rotary devices he could flip around via a small handle that was part of the gauntlets. They were very odd weapons yet seemed effective in Killer's hands as he sliced several of Apoo's crew into ribbons, the blades whirled around his arms like propellers as he leaped around the battlefield, showing tremendous agility and acrobatic skills.

Elsewhere, another member of Eustass' crew set several of Apoo's crew on fire and even as he ducked behind a still-standing wall, Kid had to sneer at the sight. *Bah. Apoo might have gathered a crew, but all of them look freaking pathetic! How has he survived this long without any other real fighters he can rely on?*

"Iron God Fist!" he growled, and the fist of metal flashed down towards Apoo.

Apoo dodged again, flipping himself away and onto a nearby roof, but the fist followed him. The tortured metal shriek rang across the grove as Kid directed the large fist after him. Apoo snarled and turned his attention toward Kid. But Kid just smirked, and a metal shield appeared in front of him.

This didn't work. The "BOOM!" still caught him, and Kid roared in pain as he stumbled back. *FUCK! Is it purely sound-based, then? He doesn't have to direct his powers by sight?*

But the metal fist still caught Apoo. The battering ram of metal smashed into him and carried him back into and through six houses before losing forward momentum.

Groaning, Apoo tried to get to his feet, only for the metal fist to suddenly shift, grabbing at him. Apoo found his arms pinned to his body and his legs trussed in metal. But he could still move his arms to a certain degree thanks to his double-jointed arms. He rapidly began to do so, one arm shifting into a keyboard as his other hand moved over to begin to play a song on it.

Kid charged over the shattered remnants of the buildings Apoo had been smashed through, a bloodthirsty grin on his face as he moved to finish the other captain off. The grin only widened as he saw Apoo trying to escape from his metallic bonds but then disappeared as Killer crashed into the rubble in front of him. "Killer!? What..."

"Oy, oy you two, save it for the New World!" shouted a new voice, a bellowing, deep voice that neither pirate captain had heard before.

Urouge the Priest, captain of the Fallen Monk Pirates strode forward, a massive club over one shoulder. He was a large man, at least twelve feet tall, with wide shoulders and hands as large as Kid and Apoo's heads. He wore a monk's traditional outfit, somewhat like what Enel's soldiers wore but in different colors, brown and black instead of white. Its sleeves were torn off, which left his arms bare up to the shoulders.

And indeed, Urouge was a Sky Islander, as were many of his crew. They were survivors of Birka, Enel's original Sky Island, who escaped while he was still testing out his powers.

His face seemed set into a permanent grin, although on his large face, it was more intimidating than jolly, accompanied by a stitched-up scar vertically descending over his jaw that started just above his left eye. In keeping with the monk aesthetic, he wore a scruffy beard,

which merged with equally scruffy sideburns. But his hair was actually cut short and cleanly to boot. This was further offset by black tattoos going down his shoulders that looked like fire.

Seeing he had the other captains' attention, Urouge shook his head slowly from side to side. "You idiots," he said almost conversationally while he calmly hopped up over a fireball from a man who looked like a zombie. He casually grabbed the man's head with one large hand and tossed him onto the slowly rising Killer, smashing them back into the rubble.

"Oy! Are you picking a fight with us too, Urouge?" Kid guffawed, and the metal all around them began to shift and twist in answer to his will.

"No." Urouge held up a hand, gesturing around him. His crew appeared from the various still-standing buildings, pointing rifles down at the two fighting crews. "I'm trying to end the fight between you before you get us all into trouble."

"Hah! We're pirates, yo. Trouble is what we do. Check it out!" Apoo sang, taking the time to shatter the metal fist holding him in place. "If you don't understand that, why're you flying a Jolly Roger?"

"Hah! Good point. But I think we all know there are some fights we don't want to pick just yet? Hmm? Not until we're stronger, yes?" Urouge questioned.

For all his bellicose nature, Kid wasn't a fool, and neither was Apoo. The two sent one another a glare before looking back at Urouge, silently demanding he explain. The large man did, one hand coming up to tug at his neat goatee with a wry smile. "Normally, I would be happy to let you two go at it around here. The marines rarely travel lower than the high thirties, save for random patrols through the amusement park. But a vice-admiral just arrived, Gion the Flash Sword."

"Hoh?" Kid smirked while Apoo hissed in displeasure. Given his lips had turned into a flute for a moment, that made for a quite irritating sound.

"Exactly. There's no way that woman will be happy with the see-no-evil, hear-no-evil attitude the marines normally take here in the Archipelago. I'll wager she will start a sweep through the lower numbers sometime soon. And I have no desire to be caught up in such."

Apoo nodded in reluctant agreement. "Fuck. Well then, I guess it's a good thing my ship's already taken on more food than, even if we haven't gotten our coating done yet. We'll circle around the Archipelago for a few days and let things settle down again. And you and me, Kid, you'll have to take a raincheck yeaahhh~?"

"Ugh, every time you open your mouth, you annoy me," Eustass grumbled. "But fine, we can put off our fight Scratchmen. Maybe by then, your crew will prove to be something worth

sailing the New World," he taunted, but Apoo snorted and walked away. And Eustass turned to Urouge. "I suppose you'll be doing the same, Urouge?"

Unlike when addressing Apoo, Eustass was somewhat cordial to Urouge, who nodded, lips quirking as he looked back at the shorter man. "We will, but why do I get the impression you won't be?"

"Heh, because I won't. Oh, my crew will pull the Victoria Punk out for now. Wire, I'll leave that to you," Eustass ordered, pointing to a tall man who held a red trident nearby.

His height actually made him almost as tall as Urouge, which the other pirate captain noticed, holding back a snicker at the sight of the odd hood the other man wore, with two small devil-like horns sticking out of the top. Indeed, Wire's entire outfit was somewhat comical to Urouge. *He looks like he isn't quite certain if he wants to be a devil or a crossdresser.*

"Eh, sure, Captain, but what will you be doing?"

"Heh. There are supposed to be many interesting slaves for sale over at the Human Auctioning House. And if this Gion finds us... well, I wonder how big my bounty would get if I took on a vice admiral and won!"

"Captain, we still need the coating," Killer protested, seeming to glare up at Urouge as he pushed the zombie-like man off him. "We also need supplies, Like Apoo mentioned."

"BWWHAHAHA!" Urouge guffawed, shaking his head, ignoring Killer as he addressed Eustass. "You really are crazy huh? I suppose that rumor about your dream to be Pirate King is true as well?"

If Urouge had said that as if he was laughing at Kid's dream, the redheaded pirate captain would have attacked him immediately. Eustass would kill or at least beat the life out of anyone who ever made fun of his dream. But since it was obvious Urouge was laughing at the idea of him taking on Gion, he simply smirked back at the larger man. "And what about you, huh?"

Urouge smiled. "Let's just say my dream's big enough to take me to the New World and leave it at that, huh?"

Snorting, Eustass nodded, then turned back to Killer, who had moved to stand beside him. "You're right, Killer. You handle that, Heat." The zombie-like man nodded and moved off, shouting several more names as he did, pulling men from the crew that Wire had already begun to gather together. "Killer, you'll come with me. There are a few sights I want to see before heading to the Auction House."

Turning entirely away from Urouge, Eustass waved one hand airily at Urouge. "I'll see you in the New World, Urouge."

Chuckling dryly, Urouge watched the other captain walk off, shaking his head. "Well, now, isn't that one interesting."

"Captain?" Another Sky Islander asked, alighting down next to him. His hairstyle consisted of multiple large spikes sticking out in every direction, and his eyes looked a little dead. "What do you mean interesting?"

"There's a mind behind that arrogance and battle lust. And I think I prefer his angry, saw-edged personality to Apoo's..."

"Captain! It was Kid who started this fight, and we've been bumping into the On Air Pirates for days now and never had a problem with any of them. You've even met with Apoo a few times, and you like Kid more?"

"Hah, I never said I liked him. But Scratchmen... there is a certain... fakeness to him, I think. Put it down to my monk's intuition," Urouge guffawed, slapping the far shorter man on the shoulder, sending him stumbling even though the slap had been quite gentle coming from his huge frame. "But come. Unlike Eustass, I have no need to tease the tiger's tail. I want us to push off and be gone from here as soon as possible."

Grumbling, the shorter man nodded, and within minutes, the Fallen Monk Pirates were gone from the scene of the battle. This left several dozen houses destroyed, many locals wounded, and a few dead, both among civilians and the On Air and Kid crews.

This being Grove 24, the residents responded in the appropriate fashion. They started to loot the bodies, fight over the spoils or start rebuilding the one building important enough to bother with, the restaurant the fight between Eustass and Scratchmen had begun in. There was no pity for the dead, grief, maybe for the locals, but no pity. From Grove 29 on down, Shabondy Archipelago was a place where dog ate dog and where money and might made right. It had a veneer of civilization in the twenties, much like in the thirties, where some order and local life was possible. But that was all it was, a veneer. At moments like this, it was every man for himself.

This was the sight that greeted Zoro as he walked along, looking for some trouble. "Oy. What happened here?" he demanded, poking one of his sheathed swords into the back of a large man who had just smashed another man into the ground with a large mallet.

"EH!? You want a piece of my spoils too!?" Mallet Man bellowed, twirling around and bringing his mallet to bear.

With a scowl, Zoro calmly caught the mallet and thrust the tip of the sheathed sword into the man's stomach. There was a loud cracking sound, and the man crumpled to the ground, grabbing at his chest, where he rolled onto his side, groaning in agony. Ignoring the man, Zoro looked over at a few other scavengers. "Well, anyone going to answer my question?"

Six of them instantly attacked him, but one didn't. Instead, the man who had a wide toolbelt and a saw on his back waited by the wall he had been trying to lever up as Zoro dealt with his attackers. When Zoro was done, the man calmly explained what had happened.

"DAMN it!" Zoro growled. "You have to be kidding me. I missed them by ten minutes?!" Zoro kicked the ground, growling in irritation. It took him a while to get control of himself, and when he did, he turned back to the carpenter. "Did you see the direction these pirates went?"

"Why would... you know what, no, I don't need to know." Once more proving he had a very good sense of self-preservation, the carpenter shook his head and pointed off in one direction. "I didn't see where they went, but the Fallen Monk Pirates probably went that way. One of them said their ship was near Grove 15."

"Grove 15, huh?" Ignoring the direction the man was pointing, Zoro looked around, realizing he was in Grove 24. He then looked around for signs, and soon found one pointing in the proper direction. *Five... well, that's a lower number right, which means it should take me back down in terms of numbers. Though why it's 5 and not 15 or whatever, I don't know.*

As he walked away, the bubble of Yarukiman Mangrove sap that had previously been blocking the view of the rest of the number on the tree slowly rose up towards the sky, leaving the number 25 to be seen. Zoro's lack of direction had struck again, and he was now heading up-number again.

OOOOOOO

At the same time that Zoro was leaving the scene of the battle between the On Air and Kid pirates, the *Everlasting Resolve* was slowly passing through the Shabondy Archipelago near the middle numbers. Here Laki, Chopper and the two guests broke off using one of the flying fish. Soon enough, the group put down in a small river leading between Groves that were so close, most of the riverways between them were covered by various bridges.

This was also the first major sign of civilization the pirates had seen in the archipelago. Here was Shabondy Park and the large town that had grown up around it. There were hotels, large, rich-looking houses, several tourist amenities, and a regular town to provide for the workers. There was still no real marine presence, but there were many local security guards.

Laki hopped off of the flying fish, placing a large feedbag over its nose, while behind her, Chopper followed. She looked around them as he leaned back down, lifting Camie up out of the saddle. Hachi hopped up a moment later, holding the floating chair that Franky had made for

Camie. When she was sat down on it, the dress she wore and the chair combined to make it look like Camie was just a normal human woman, who was unable to walk for some reason, her legs completely covered by a long dress that reached well below where her flippers were.

Hachi also wore a shirt with six of his eight arms tied to his chest underneath it. It made him look somewhat overweight but coupled with a long-sleeved shirt and a band-aid on his forehead, it made him look human... sort of. Close enough, apparently, since there were other people nearby, and Laki saw they weren't giving him a second glance.

People on the Blue Sea really are more used to unusual appearances than we were up on the White-White Sea, Laki thought ruefully, noting absently that she was being given far more looks than Hachi, but those looks had everything to do with her looks and nothing to do with her wings.

Currently, Laki was dressed in a way she was mentally labeled as Nami Norm, that is, in a somewhat more outgoing manner than she was really happy with, with a sharp emphasis on her feminine curves. She had a tight shirt up top showing off her curves, which, while nowhere near as obvious as Nami, Laki did have. A pair of shorts which, while going down to her knees, was also very tight in the rear. And finally, her hair had been turned into a dark auburn color and then set into curls that bounced on her shoulders. Makino said the look was 'sexy farm girl', and it seemed to work as few noticed the bag on her back, which contained her latest experimental rifle.

Chopper too had been given a bit of a disguise, though not much of one. Chopper would remain in his normal, tiny form, and Luffy had put him in a pair of long pants and shirts to hide his fur. This and a mask – the same kind of mask people would use if they were sick – almost made him look like a normal human kid. Almost. While the eyepatch looked cute in this form and thus wasn't an issue, and the antlers could be seen as just part of his hat, Chopper's fur was an issue still, and Luffy teased Chopper about how "I can't quite finish your costume. Are ya sure I can't just shave yer fur off? Just the face, you wouldn't even notice."

"Yes I would, and no!" Chopper barked back, asking, "If I have to transform into my Heavy Point, will the shirt and pants change with me?"

"Don't they normally?" Luffy questioned, nonplussed. "I mean, do ya need to do anything normally to make 'em stretch? I mean, I don't need to when I use my powers."

"...Come to think of it..." Chopper and Luffy stared at one another, both recalling the other Devil Fruit users they had met whose clothing also changed with them.

"Devil Fruit weirdness?" Luffy suggested.

"Devil Fruit weirdness," Chopper agreed.

"I can't believe we are actually going to go to the park! Ferris Wheel, Rollercoasters!" Camie cheered, pumping her arms in the air, her shout interrupting the awkward moment between Luffy and the tiny doctor.

"Nyu, I can't believe we're doing this either. Just remember, Camie. We need to make certain your disguise stays in place," Hachi warned.

"Listen to Hachan, this is a big risk Camie!" Papaag grumbled from where he was on Chopper's shoulder, trying hard not to let his mouth be seen as he pressed his face against Chopper's shirt.

"I know, but I've always wanted to see the Ferris Wheel!" Camie said with a grin.

"And if anyone messes with her, don't worry. That's why my latest toy is here," Laki murmured, patting her bag as she took up a position at the back of the group, with Chopper leading the way. "Now, let's see if this park is all it's cracked up to be..."

Yet, even as they joined a crowd to get tickets, these disguises failed.

Two men lounging nearby on a bench eating a meal were watching the crowd closely. They weren't dressed very richly and didn't seem to be going into the park, but since they had a few bags at their feet and food in front of them, the private security guards nearby didn't give them a second glance. Now they paused eating, staring first at Laki, then the bag on her back before looking away.

At first, that was all there was to it, the two men, spotters for the Archipelago's best kidnapping group, deciding the pretty redheaded Sky Island girl wasn't worth the effort. "Besides, wasn't there a recent run of those a few months back?"

"I don't like her eyes. They are watching the people around her too damn much..." The two men paused, looking back at one another and starting a loud argument about who paid for what as the woman in question looked in their direction.

After a moment they breathed a sigh of relief. "Yeah, no."

"Agreed, that was like we were being watched by a hawk just waiting for a chance to swoop down and eat. Ugh. Anyway, we might want to move on soon. The food's almost gone and our props aren't...wait..." the man's whisper fell off as he spotted something a movement at the bottom of the sitting woman's blanket. "Wait... no...way..."

He looked in another direction for a moment as the group passed through, then back peering through the crowd desperately, his companion looking in the same direction. After a moment, the second man spotted a tiny movement where a normal woman's feet would be but

in a direction that no woman would find comfortable. "I think we need to buy ourselves some tickets and go to the park, yeah?"

"Yeah... if that is a mermaid, even our normal ten percent cut would set us up for months!" his partner enthused.

An hour later, they were leaving the park, grinning. "Peterman is going to love this! A real mermaid, damn! The Auction hasn't seen one of those in nearly five years!" Soon they were on their way, racing along the waterways in a small steam-powered boat, planning further trouble.

That was the problem with adding ingredients to an already chaotic soup. Sometimes the ingredient you added didn't react as you expected...

OOOOOOO

Sometime later, Zoro found himself passing through another small village or town. This one seemed built around fishing and selling ale, and Zoro was so happy for a few moments that he forgot his mission. It was only after he had grabbed a beer that he remembered he was supposed to be causing chaos. *But how the hell am I supposed to do that if I can't find any of the other Supernovas? I know my captain wouldn't want me to just start slicing the locals up, not unless they actually attack me like those morons did the other day.*

He finished his beer and bought two more as he walked along, looking around himself, trying to spot any pirates he could pound. But all he saw were locals. Some of these locals did attack him, being kidnapers or local gang members angry at his being in their territory. But putting them down took no time at all, and Zoro continued on his way, becoming a little annoyed.

An hour and two Groves later, his prayers were answered. This grove seemed to be mostly a mix between bars and cheap hotels, with a few side businesses built around transportation of goods, the grove not being as put together, so to speak as some of the other groves he had seen with lots of small rivers throughout it leading into the larger breaks between the other groves.

Some of those goods came in cages, with manacles around the necks of the individuals within. Men, women, a few children were in cages here, their mouths gagged in most cases. In others, the individual in the cage simply sat, staring straight ahead, their eyes not seeing the view around them but some inner horror. There were a few mermen there, a few men who seemed to have weird, double-jointed arms, and even a young giant, his large cage laid out on its side. Over his face was a large mask connected to a series of gas bottles.

Zoro stood for a moment, watching all this, his eyes dark as one hand rested lightly on his blades, particularly his newest sword, the black blade, Shusui. *I would wager Luffy would love it if I start causing trouble here, other Supernova or not.*

“Mmm, and there is a face I didn’t expect to see.”

Turning, Zoro looked at where the voice had come from. Nearby sitting on a crate by a small alleyway, was a young man maybe four or more years older than Zoro, with slightly thinner shoulders wearing a black and yellow long-sleeved shirt, a white-furred hat that looked like it had come from a dalmatian, and long, dexterous looking fingers. His fingers were currently intertwined as his elbows rested on his knees, well away from a sword beside him. It looked like a nodachi, but even larger both in length and the width of the blade. On the shirt was what looked like a pirate’s mark, a smiley face with a wide grin and a tiny dot for a nose with regular-sized eyes and a series of what might be nails or something sticking out of every side of the circular smiley face.

“Roronoa Zoro, 240,000,000 Beli.” The man went on, smiling thinly at Zoro. “Now, I wonder...”

That was as far as he got before Zoro pulled out his swords, putting Wado Ichimonji in his mouth as he took Sandai Kitetsu and Shusui in hand. The man tensed, his hand flashing towards his blade even as he held out his other hand peaceably. “Now, now, Zoro, I don’t want to fight you. I’m just wondering how you survived. Rumors coming out of the marines say you Straw Hats were destroyed. Are you here to join one of our crews?”

“Heh,” Zoro snorted, speaking around the hilt of Wado Ichimonji, making no move to calm down. “Sure. If you make me captain.”

“EH!? What did you say to Captain Law?!” a man shouted, in a polar bear costume, or maybe a real polar bear trained to act like a man, Zoro couldn’t tell. Several other people in an odd white-seeming uniform thing also growled angrily, grabbing at their weapons.

The man himself, on the other hand, simply shrugged. “Hahaha, well, you’ve got some spirit at least. Still, I suppose you’ve already seen that spirit can only take you so far on this sea. You need brains and knowledge too. Something your previous crew obviously lacked. Or was it strength? I’ve always wondered if you and your captain got those big bounties of yours too quickly.”

“Why don’t you find out for yourself then!?” Zoro growled, lashing out with Sandai, sending a 24 Cannon Pound Ho towards the man.

Swiftly the man lashed out with his own sword, drawing and cutting forward quickly, sending a blast of cutting forward into Zoro’s attack. Both attacks dissipated, and the man, Law, raised his hand. “Room.”

A strange force flashed out from the man in every direction, tinting the area around them in a wide sphere a strange blue color. Zoro scowled, looking around and down at himself, wondering what this was.

“You should always know who you are picking a fight with, Roronoa Zoro, knowledge and brains, as I said. My name is Trafalgar Law. I’m known as the Surgeon of Death. And you’ve just entered the operating room,” Law intoned, his previous smirk replaced by a cold, calculating look. “After I break your ego, I might put you back together.”

With that, he lashed out with his sword, creating the same cutting force as before, a scythe-shaped blast of air that rocketed towards Zoro. Zoro showed no fear, however, and lashed out with all three of his swords this time. “108 Pound Cannon!”

This shot forward a saw-like circular cutting blast of air pressure wider than Zoro was tall and expanding as it blasted away from him, three-saw-like waves of air pressure merging into a larger whole, far larger than any similar attack Zoro had launched against an enemy before. *That’s the way Shusui*, Zoro said with a smirk, watching the attack fly forward. He had practiced with Shusui against Luffy before this and had gotten used to the amount of energy it added to his attacks.

The circular saw blade smacked into the incoming attack from Trafalgar with much the same ease as a cannon blast from a battleship would a musket-ball fired from a pistol.

Hastily, Law instantly leaped away, cutting through the attack several times as he backpedaled. He then jumped forward and sent another series of attacks Zoro’s way. Each lazy swing of his sword created the same blue-tinged blast, and watching them come, Zoro took a moment to take that color in. *Huh, that doesn’t look like an air pressure attack. Could it have something to do with this Room thing?*

Deciding he didn’t want to find out, Zoro lashed out with a series of strikes, dissipating the attacks. However, a few of the attacks were simply redirected instead of dissipated, and when they cut into a nearby wall, Law held up his free hand. “Shambles!”

The bits of the wall suddenly shifted position until they were above Zoro, at which point they fell. Zoro felt them coming, but Law launched further attacks, making Zoro dance in place, dodging around them. Trafalgar closed on the heels of his attacks, thrusting his sword forward in a strike that Zoro could barely redirect as he danced between the other strikes.

But Trafalgar soon learned closing wasn’t a good move as his blade was smacked aside, and Zoro’s other blade came up in a slash. He dodged, but the cut sliced into his clothing, and he nearly lost his head to a swirling slash from Wado Ichimonji. Slicing into the ground, he kicked the resulting piece of ground up into the air. “Shambles.”

With that word, Trafalgar moved himself up into the air, replacing the bit of ground. There he lashed out with a near-point-blank strike towards Zoro's head. But Zoro could block it with Wado, cutting the attack with the white-hilted blade's edge.

Seeing that, Trafalgar teleported himself backward, switching himself with another bit of a building that Zoro's earlier attack had cut off. This brought him back to his crew, who had taken cover the moment he had used his Room powers. So too had many of the passersby, although many had also frozen. Not that Trafalgar cared about this overmuch. No, he was more concerned that his attack hadn't cut through the sword the Pirate Hunter held in his mouth. *Hmm, that kind of solidity speaks of a large amount of inherent Haki, perhaps even Busoshoku. Damn it, I have barely begun to awaken my own, and I know that kind of skill will offset my Ope Ope fruit.*

That was about as far as his thoughts could get before Zoro jumped forward, covering the distance between them in what Law recognized as a Geppo-laced leap. "Karasuma Gari!" A series of slashes flashed out toward Law, who once more teleported away. His crew on the other hand had to dodge and duck aside, and seeing that, Law shouted. "Bepo, close! The rest of you get back!"

Bepo, the polar bear man hopped forward, lashing out with a kick, which Zoro almost lazily blocked, using one blade. His return strike nearly cut Bepo in half, but the martial arts using polar bear was fast enough to dodge away just enough to avoid the cut before closing again. Still Zoro didn't back down, easily blocking every blow sent his way, his return strikes slicing into Bepo's side, shoulder and leg, while keeping his main attention on Law, who, now with more room, launched further attacks Zoro's way.

Watching Zoro deflecting or cutting his own Ope Ope attacks into pieces even as he battered Bepo away, Law grimaced. "Fuck. He really does deserve his bounty, damn it, and I'm getting the impression he's taking this about as seriously as I am..." *Which, I have to admit, isn't much just yet.* "Bepo, fall back!"

With that, Bepo flipped away, and Law transferred himself with his crewmember. This put him above Zoro, whereupon he lashed out and downward with Kikoku, his blade.

Zoro raised Shusui to block the strike. The two blades smashed into one another and the swordsman grimaced at the impact. "Hoh? So, you're not just a one-trick pony, huh?"

"Hah, as if any pirate can survive by being a one-trick pony." Law smirked, teleporting to one side and slicing in. Zoro blocked this strike too, but Law had anticipated that, and ducked inside, his other hand lashing out towards Zoro's chest. "Mes."

While Zoro only had a very limited ability in Kenbunshoku, his danger sense had been honed to an incredible degree while sparring with Luffy. He felt the danger of letting that hand

touch him and knew he couldn't dodge fast enough to escape the hand entirely. Instead, he instantly covered his body with Busoshoku.

The strike still hit with all the force of one of Luffy's own Busoshoku strikes, smashing Zoro off his feet and skidding away. Rolling away, he coughed a bit of blood, spitting to one side. "Nice hit."

Law grimaced, wringing out his hand. That strike nearly broke his fingers, and he scowled in irritation. *I am not nearly as good at using my Ope Ope powers as he seems with Busoshoku. That leaves...* He looked around them and began to smile. "Crew, fire!"

His crewmen had only retreated out of his room, and now they fired into it with every weapon they had, with Bepo shouting encouragement. "Fire, fire!"

Zoro ignored the musket balls coming his way, instead keeping his attention on Law, much to his annoyance. But the faint eye flicker this brought was enough for Law to teleport away, appearing near Bepo. "Bepo, I have a job for you..."

He only had time to say three sentences before Zoro was on him again, and then Law desperately defended himself from the Busoshoku-clad swordsman. Grimacing again, Law tried to cover his swords with Busoshoku in turn. He could do so but knew that Zoro would win this fight if he had to go sword to sword with him too often. Law was fast and strong, but Zoro was on a whole different level. *All I have going for me is my Devil Fruit, and Busoshoku blocks most of my abilities with it and my intelligence. Here is hoping that's enough!*

With that, he teleported away, shifting onto a nearby cage. The people around it screamed, racing out of their hiding places as Zoro lashed out at him with another series of long-range strikes, 24 Pound Cannon Attacks. The attacks sliced into the side of the cage, cutting it into pieces, and Law teleported away, switching with a chunk of the cage in midair.

As he did, Law smirked, even as he lashed out toward Zoro, keeping his distance and moving around the edge of his Room, keeping Zoro near the center of it for now. *I might not be able to beat you, Zoro, but maybe I can outlast you. And if I can't outlast you, I can at least use you...*

OOOOOOO

Unlike Zoro, who had wandered around and only vaguely been moving up through the groves into the higher numbers, Luffy, Brook and Makino made their way straight into the 30s zone. In many ways, this was the most important section of the Archipelago, where the lawful met the unlawful. There still wasn't anything like a marine presence, but there were a lot of settled businesses and far more locals who didn't have anything to do with criminal elements here. Those elements were still prevalent, but there was a certain amount of order in the local

society, as pirates and other criminal types knew that this area was too close to the more law-abiding sectors to make trouble openly.

Luffy figured that coming here would kill two stones. One, he figured that perhaps this would put her close enough to start reacting to whatever trouble Zoro caused quickly wherever he found some. No, he lacked trust in Zoro keeping to the lower numbers. And two, Makino wanted to shop around for new weapons for herself and Laki. They both lost their specialized weapons, Laki's rifle and Makino's pistols, during the battles against the Kuja Pirates, and they simply hadn't had enough material aboard the ship to replace them.

That part of the operation had gone very well. The Shabondy Archipelago was the entrance to the New World; thus, a lot of good came from all over the world. Because of that, they found several stores selling different types of weapons, if at exorbitant prices. Here, Makino had bought two North Blue pistols like her formally prized pistol, six shooters that wouldn't have been out of place in the wild West. She also found a rifle that looked from the same period and a small, collapsible spyglass she thought might double as a sniper scope.

The prices for the three guns nearly wiped out their available funds, the beli they had taken from the crew's treasury. Luffy quickly solved this by going off on her own into one of the more lawless groves and then taking advantage of idiots who attacked the lone redhead by fleecing them for everything they had. Luffy called this a, "Tried and true method of living off the land, much like any hunter would lookin' for dear. Shhh... I'm hunting idiots," which caused his companions to laugh.

There were also a few odd weapons, pistol daggers, a gauntlet with a gun built into its outer shell, and a few others that Makino felt Laki would want to experiment with. Makino had cheerfully put all of these into her ki space, causing more than one store owner to faint, much to the pirate's amusement. Luffy was very interested to see what Franky and Laki would make of those, especially considering how much brainstorming Laki had already begun thanks to the multi-barrel rotating gun concept they had been introduced to by Sanji's look-alike.

With the shopping now over, the three of them were walking down the street, Luffy grumbling to herself, shaking her head and looking bored. "It's been hours. Hasn't Zoro found some trouble yet?"

"Maybe he's found too much trouble and is having trouble breaking off long enough to call?" Makino soothed. "Don't worry, it's Zoro. He'll get to it eventually."

"That makes so much sense it makes my teeth ache," the redhead retorted.

"Yohohohoho, while I have not been on the crew for overlong, I too can see sense in the Makino's words. However, I would also caution in this case. Zoro is the one who is currently risking his skin in this operation, whereas we, Yohohohoho, and in my case, in particular, do not

have any skin in this game until we reveal ourselves. Because I have no skin at all! Skull Joke!” Brook chuckled.

Snorting, Luffy punched Brook playfully on the shoulder, getting an “Ouch! You struck me so hard that you damaged my bones. But then again, my bones are all I have, Yohohohoho, Skull Joke!” In response. But before Luffy could follow up on that to say whatever she had been about to, there came a scream from nearby.

“Please, you can’t, Marie’s my wife!”

Luffy was already moving before the scream had finished, and seconds later, she was pushing past several onlookers, including a pink-haired woman wearing a green beret and a white, low-cut tank top that exposed her midriff and a good bit of cleavage. Below that, she had orange-and-black striped buckled shorts, the long, thin suspenders that went up over her chest and down her back. Black high-heeled boots reached to the pink-haired woman’s calves, from within which a pair of hot pink and dark red stockings with a yellow sun-like design sprouted. The hat she wears is a green beret with a light-green lining.

Her bright red lipstick and the extra eyebrow she had under one eye almost grabbed Luffy’s attention, reminding him of one of the bounty posters, but she ignored it, for now, heading deeper into the crowd.

Behind Luffy, Makino paused, looking at the woman for a second. *Jewelry Bonney, bounty 140,000,000 Beli. But Now isn’t the time to comment.* Instead, Makino bowed apologetically to the pirate captain and hurried after Luffy.

In return, the woman had been about to snarl at Luffy before halting at Makino’s show of good manners. But it was not that which really stopped her from reacting. Instead, it was the tableau occurring out on the main street.

Pushing through the crowd, Luffy came to the front of the crowd lining the sides of the main street. There she paused, her face shutting down, fury and hatred ratcheting through her at the site for her. *They’re here! One of those bastards is here!*

Out on the street, a woman had just been collared by a man, a young-looking man maybe in his middle 20s or so. His face was florid, with a noticeable stubble on his chin being the only sign of real age there. The man was overweight, although not grossly so, his entire image was of someone who had not had to work for a day. His black hair was done up in a strange kind of topknot like an upside-down L-shape, with the bottom of it pointing forward. It was also a somewhat stupid yet altogether arrogant face as he sneered at a man who was on his knees in front of him.

But the most important feature about the man wasn’t his face. No, the man’s defining feature for everyone who saw him was instead the outfit he wore. This white outfit almost

looked like a spacesuit, designed to keep the man from interacting with anything in the outside world, complete with a fishbowl helmet and a backpack with its own air supply. There were even a few markings on it that almost looked like buttons, except they weren't, made instead out of various precious metals and different cloth.

This man was a Tenryubito, one of the rulers of the World Government. This arrogant, fat, useless-looking man was one of the world's most important people, with the WG's full power behind him, symbolizing their power and corruption all in one.

Luffy had seen the like before. Back then, he had wondered why the Tenryubito's outfits looked like space suits. But now, the hatred that memory evoked merged with anger at the sight before her. She began pushing people aside, all of whom were bowing to the man, fear making them look away in shame.

Seeing Luffy still moving forward, Makino raced forward, hugging the shorter woman from behind, putting her arms around Luffy's upper arms, pinning them to Luffy's side, although Makino knew if Luffy wanted, she could easily break out of Makino's grip. She had to rely on her words to reach Luffy. "Ranko, calm down! Think about it! Is your anger or what is going on here worth scuttling our plans going forward?"

But Luffy wasn't listening and almost seemed to ignore her as she took another step forward, dragging Makino with her easily despite Makino using Tekkai to try and make her footing too solid to move. Brook joined in, moving in front of Luffy to block her view of the events in the main street, placing both of his skeletal hands on the shorter girl's shoulders.

He quickly found himself being pressed back as Luffy doggedly moved forward, her glare up at him causing the skeleton to shiver in fear, although like Makino, he remembered to use Luffy's made-up name. "P, please do not do anything hasty, Ranko. There is more at stake here if you recall. If you wish to do something, we must be subtle about it."

The pink-haired woman noticed what the redhead was doing and grabbed her arm. The strength of that grip actually caused Luffy to stop for a moment and pulled her back off balance, which the pink-haired woman instantly capitalized on, shrieking a whisper into the redhead's ear. "What the hell do you think you're doing, bitch!? That's a Tenryubito. You mess with him, and the whole Archipelago will burn, including my crew and me!"

Coupled with Makino's continued whispers, this finally caused Luffy to pause for a moment. She watched as the man bowed before the Tenryubito spoke up. He wore a green shirt with some kind of picture on it, but he was kowtowing so hard it was hard to tell what it was. "Please, please don't take Marie!"

"She's no longer your wife, man! I fancy her. Therefore, she is mine," the Tenryubito announced arrogantly. "Come, woman."

“Please, no Charlos-sama!” the man and woman shrieked. “Anything but that!”

The so-named Charlos sighed, then pulled out a pistol pointing it at the man almost lazily as behind him, several guards stepped forward from where they had been surrounding a large merman slave of some sort, although what variety of Fishman he was, Luffy had no idea. They were obviously World Government workers, wearing the normal uniform of such, with swords and rifles on their backs.

As the rest of the crowd watched, Charlos fired, hitting the man on the ground in the shoulder, causing him to scream and fall onto his side, writhing in agony.

“Judy!” The woman shouted, tugging at her chain to try and reach the man, but Charlos pulled her back.

“What part about you being mine now do you lower class not understand? He has nothing to do with you any longer. You are mine,” the man said, his words slow and arrogant as if he was talking to an animal that didn’t quite understand who the master was.

That was as far as he got before Luffy broke out of the pink-haired woman’s grip and stepped forward. This shocked Bonney somewhat, and she had a moment to curse the fact she had decided not to use her Devil Fruit power this near a Tenryubito, no matter how idiotic he looked, before Luffy was out of her reach.

Even in the grip of her anger, Luffy was mindful of the words Makino had just spoken to them. With that single step out to the front of the crowd, she unleashed her Haoshoku but controlled this time in a way she had never done before. Luffy had been practicing with it back on the giant oyster island, where they had met the trio of kids and then again with Hancock occasionally over the past few days. He could now direct it at a single target, almost like Dracule “Hawk Eyes” Mihawk could with his glare but without the need to meet someone else’s eyes.

The Tenryubito had no defense, and his will was utterly laughable, giving Luffy the impression this was like using a sledgehammer to squash an ant. Regardless, the result was immensely satisfying as Charlos slumped, his eyes rolling back in his head and drool poured out of his mouth into his helmet.

None of his followers knew what it happened. One moment he was his normal Tenryubito self, lording it over his newest prize, which would no doubt soon be forgotten and sold. The next moment, he fell forward onto his face, hitting the ground so hard that a crack appeared in the glass globe covering his head.

For a moment, no one moved, then the two of the guards raced to his side as the woman hastily backed away, all three talking over one another.

“Charlos-sama!?”

“What happened? What did you do, woman!?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

Grinning viciously to himself, Luffy moved forward, moving past the woman, one hand reaching for Marie’s collar. Luffy’s fingers tore through the metal, pulling it away from the woman’s throat just a bit. “Hold the front of it, so it’s visible to the guards,” she whispered as she passed by the woman obeying almost without conscious thought, so commanding was Luffy’s tone.

Then she was kneeling beside the unconscious form of Charlos. Her hands moved so fast that only Makino and the pink-haired woman could follow the movement, and even then, much of their view was blocked by Luffy’s body as she disconnected very, very slightly the air unit from Charlos’ dome helmet. “It looks as if he caught some kind of disease. I’m no expert but aren’t the Tenryubito supposed to be susceptible to disease for some reason? That’s why they wear the masks, right?”

One of the World Government officials sneered at her, scoffing in irritation. But whatever he was going to say, his friend elbowed him in the side before he could do so. “She might be right. Look, one of his back air ducts isn’t plugged in properly. Damn it, how did we miss that!? And he’s now cracked his helmet a bit. That can’t be good either.”

“Damn, we’ll have to get him back to the ship then. Radio ahead. We’ll want the ship’s doctors ready to receive him! If anything happens to him, it’s our heads that will roll.” He looked speculatively at the redhead, but Luffy had already backed away, moving over to the man who had been shot.

Feeling the man’s eyes on her, Luffy looked up, then rapidly shook her head. “I’m at best a field medic, I don’t know anything about diseases, and while I don’t want to die, I’m not exactly a Tenryubito ass licker like you.” Even on her best behavior, Luffy couldn’t let a chance to get in a dig like that slide.

The man growled at her but was pulled back to matters at hand by his fellows, who gestured at the prisoner behind them, a large merman of some kind. He towered over them but was fully chained up, with a far more formal, permanent-looking collar around his neck. “Pick Charlos-sama up! We’re heading back to the ship at Grove 2.”

“I just hope whatever it is, isn’t hard to cure. Charlos will be in a really bad mood if he misses this month’s auction,” one of the men muttered, so low that Luffy didn’t hear them.+

“What about that one?” One of the other men said, gesturing towards the woman who had been the center of this incident, who stiffened.

“Leave her. It might have been her touch that gave Charlos whatever he is down with now,” the other man muttered. He looked at the woman two, smirking slightly. “You got lucky, girl.”

Without another word, he turned away, and the procession of slaves, guards, and unconscious Tenryubito moved off.

As soon as they were away, the men and women around the street who had witnessed all this rose from where they had taken to their knees. While most just went about their business, a few hurried forward to help the doctor, with Luffy backing away from him as they did. The woman, Marie, also tossed aside the remnants of her collar to hurry to her husband, shouting a thank you to Luffy for freeing her before turning her full attention to her husband.

But the watching pink-haired woman was not in a good mood. She stepped up to Luffy, grabbing her arm and turning the redhead with one hand, the other coming up in a quick punch to the jaw that sent Luffy stumbling, internally whistling a little at the strength of it. It wasn't enough to actually hurt her, but it certainly got her attention. “You idiot! What the hell did you just do!? If that Tenryubito realizes he got knocked out somehow, he might order a Buster Call on the Archipelago in a fit of pique!”

Not one to take being cold-cocked lying down, Luffy punched back. The blow came so quickly that the woman had no chance to dodge or even prep, hitting her in the stomach and nearly folding Jewelry in half even as the strike lifted her off the ground and hurled her backward.

Bonney recovered midair, getting her feet to push off the wall behind her. Kicking off, she rolled forward, pushing her arms forward as she came up in a boxer's stance, crouching down low, ignoring the stinging in her stomach. “You want to go, bitch?!”

“You're the one who punched me first, Jewelry Bonney! Ya might not be one of the bounties I'm after, but you'll do just as well,” Luffy retorted, getting back into her bounty Hunter role a bit.

Nearby, Makino found several others in the crowd moving forward to engage Luffy and, with a shrug, she decided to get into the swing of things. Pulling out her pistols, she shot the weapons out of several of their hands, then charged forwards, hoping to keep the fight close so stray shots couldn't hurt any of the bystanders, who were now racing away in every direction, or, in the case of too many, placing bets.

Striking several of Bonney's crew down, Brook stepped forward, bowing politely to the woman, as he flourished his blade and began to play his own role. “While we are after the Straw Hats, your own bounty is quite large. I am afraid that unless you allow me to see your panties, I will be joining my compatriot in trying to capture you.”

"I ain't about to show anyone my panties, but I can show everyone what you look in diapers!" Bonney retorted as she flashed forward, faster than Luffy had thought she could move. Indeed, jewelry Bonney looked almost as fast as Sanji, or maybe Chopper in his Jumping Point form. Not nearly as fast as Luffy could move even without his lightning form, but fast enough that Bonney could probably learn the roasting chestnuts technique.

Brook tried to block her strike with his sword, but she danced around it and then smacked him upside the head, sending him flying even as she shouted, "Age Regression: Toddler!"

Brook's body glowed for a moment, but to Bonney's surprise, nothing happened. He twirled in midair, getting his feet under him and landing, bending at the knees and facing her once more with his sword outraised, and Bonney paused, staring at him as she cocked her head to one side in confusion. "What the heck!? You're supposed to be a baby right now."

"I regret to inform you, Madame, that if you have some kind of power that regresses a person's body to its youth, I am but a corpse rather than a living person. All I have left is my soul and my bones Yohohohoho!" Brook chuckled, bowing his head and doffing his hat to her before taking a combat stance.

Staring at him, Bonney took a moment to process this, then shrieked like a little girl, leaping away and landing on a nearby rooftop, shouting, "Oh hell no! I am not dealing with ghosts or skeletons or any of that shit!"

Luffy went after her, landing nearby, but she didn't attack this time. Instead, she asked, "Wait, what was supposed to happen?"

Bonney turned to her, bringing up her hands like a boxer, but when Luffy made no move to attack, she growled out, "Like I said bitch, the afro-man was supposed to age back to a toddler. But don't think I need to touch you to activate that power! My Devil Fruit power works just as well in beam form!"

While she wasn't certain that Bonney was telling the truth there, Luffy was in no hurry to find out. Instead, she straightened from her combat crouch, shaking her head. "Never mind. I'm not feeling this any longer."

Makino nodded, landing next to them with a faint look over the rooftop's side and a shiver before resolutely facing the two women. "Right. We don't want the World Government to have access to that kind of power for certain. We're bounty hunters, but we're not exactly blind to the World Government's corruption, and that is a step too far."

Grumbling, Bonney let her hands fall to her side, looking over the rooftop's side and grimacing as she saw much of her crew had been laid out by the green-haired woman and the

skeleton, who had now paused in his attacks, backing away from the others. “What the hell, first ya pick a fight, then back away?”

As she looked over the rooftop down to the streets below, Bonney also noted that none of the bystanders had been hurt. Indeed, the only one beside her crew who looked injured at all was the doctor who had been shot by the Tenryubito. *The green-haired woman took out four of my crew members without even damaging a building, let alone any of the civis getting hurt? These three are good.*

“What, you want to continue our fight? I guarantee I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve that you won’t like one bit,” Luffy warned, seeing the glare return to Bonney’s face. “Take it as a win, and let’s go our separate ways, okay?” *Besides, if all else fails, I can point Zoro toward the Tenryubito. Those idiots said his ship was at Grove 2, which is deep in the lawless sector, and that’ll work even more in our favor.*

“Dammit! You’re talking so high and mighty for a mere bounty Hunter!” Bonney grumbled, but she wasn’t a pirate that enjoyed fighting for the sake of fighting. *And the one punch that redhead already landed is still hurting! I bet I’d win in the end, but I would come away with a ton of bruises, and I’m not in the Archipelago to pick a fight. I just want my ship to get coated, to follow up on those rumors and get gone without any complications. There are too many other players around here for my liking.*

Remembering the rumors she wanted to follow up on, Bonney pointed at the bounty hunters. “Tell me one thing, and I’ll let you lot go without any more trouble.”

Luffy scowled at her tone of voice, but Makino touched her arm gently, shaking her head. “It would depend on what that one thing is.”

Somewhat thrown off by the older woman’s sisterly attitude and smile, Bonney scratched at her nose, looking away and then looking back, somewhat embarrassed. “There have been some rumors going around, rumors that Fire Fist Ace hasn’t been seen recently, despite being out here in Paradise. And that he was last seen fighting someone. And I know he was here in Paradise trying to find that bastard Blackbeard. Have you heard anything more than that in your travels?”

Both Luffy and Makino looked at her blankly, and then Makino began to giggle. That giggle caused Bonney to back away a step as Luffy’s eyes widened. “Oh my, oh my!”

“W, what?” Bonney muttered.

Within an eyeblink, Makino crossed the intervening distance so fast that Bonney almost couldn’t follow her before the green-haired woman was now holding onto her arm, leaning in, a smile on her face that caused a shiver to go down Bonney’s spine. “And why are you so worried about Fire Fist Ace, my dear? Is there something romantic going on here? Inquiring minds wish

to know. And don't worry about me telling anyone. In fact, I know Ace quite well... I could help you..."

Bonney couldn't help it, and she began to blush, which seemed to be enough of an answer for Makino. "You know, I think I saw a restaurant nearby. Why don't you and I have a chat, Bonney-chan." With that, Makino pulled a protesting Bonney with her towards the side of the roof.

Behind them, Luffy and Brook exchanged a glance. "Well, far be it for me to turn down food, I guess," Luffy sighed. "Besides, we've done our shopping, so we're killing time until Zoro starts something. So long as Makino doesn't expect me to participate in the actual discussion, I suppose we can indulge her for a moment."

"Yohohohoho, pirate or bounty Hunter, it matters not, a young maiden's heart always searches for romance. Seeing this makes me feel alive again. Alas, I am only bones! Skull joke!"

Laughing in turn, Luffy led the way off the rooftop, following after the two natural-born women.

OOOOOOO

"Boss, we've got a large ship coming down the river. It's so big I don't think it will be able to maneuver much. But it is big enough that it might push through the chain net if we raise it. Do you think we should let it go or try our luck?"

The man so addressed was a huge man by normal standards, almost as big as Urouge the Fallen Monk, although he had nothing of that man's reputation despite being older by several decades. Now he stretched, frowning in thought and then nodding. "Describe the ship to me but get ready all the same to pull up the chains. A big ship moving around like that within the Archipelago it's undoubtedly a pirate ship of some kind, which means they've got loot aboard. And if not, we can always sell the pirates themselves to the auction house."

The initial speaker, a much younger man wearing trousers and suspenders and wielding a large grapnel rope in one hand and a spyglass in the other, nodded and began to speak. But before he could, there was a whistling sound from above them.

Both men and the several other men nearby looked up, only to see a large mass coming towards them through the foliage of the massive tree-like branch of the Yarukiman Mangrove. That mass quickly resolved itself into the figure of a large obese woman, who slammed down onto the top of the thin suspender-wearing man, crushing him into the ground with the sound of dozens of bones going snap, crackle, pop all at once.

Her trident flashed out in every direction, skewering and smashing men aside as the large man roared and charged. But she simply batted aside his club. Twirling around him, the

woman grabbed the back of his head, slamming him face first into the mangrove branch with such force that there was a creaking groan from the branch, and blood spurted from a broken nose as the man lost consciousness.

He slumped to the ground, and the next second, several other women descended, hopping down through the air via Geppo to finish off a few of the would-be kidnappers who had tried to run. Once the last had been knocked out, Marigold ordered. "Gather them up."

Within seconds, all of the would-be kidnappers had been pulled up onto shoulders, and Marigold and her team headed back to the Everlasting Resolve. Along the way, they made a brief stop at the edge of the riverway the ship was traveling along between groves, dumping the dead weight into the ocean below.

For a moment, Marigold bounced there in midair, watching the would-be kidnappers sink, a vicious smirk on her face. It had been men like that who had initially captured Marigold and her sisters, and the more men like that Marigold sent to Davy Jones, the better she liked it. *I might not agree with this alliance or anything to do with this plan in general, but I can for sure get behind that aspect, at least.*

Landing on the main deck of the Everlasting Resolve, she looked up to where Sonja poked her head out from within the crow's nest, waving at her sister as she made her way up to the bridge. There, she found Nami standing beside the open doorway. The girl had professed to need to feel the weather on her skin, but Franky didn't have the material necessary to replace the always closed windows with ones that could open just yet. Apparently, that kind of thing required a more delicate hinge than the massive shutters that could come down to defend the bridge in a fight.

She barely nodded to the orange-haired girl, looking over to where Robin sat with her eyes closed, Luffy's odd straw hat on her head. Hancock lounged in her snake seat next to the woman in the center of the bridge, her eyes closed as well. With Luffy off on her own aspect of this wild scheme of hers/his, some of Hancock's normal hauteur and distance from other people had reappeared, and Marigold was pleased to see it. "We found that group of men right where you said they would be, Nee-sama. Anyone else?"

"None that I can sense evincing any interest in our direction," Hancock murmured, her voice somewhat unemotional as she concentrated on her Kenbunshoku. "Although my range with Kenbunshoku isn't the best. Robin, your eyes are passing my limit now."

"I know. I'll push them out a few more dozen yards or so. I think that is the limit of my ability to take in the input from so many eyes. But it should also be the limit of anyone trying to see us with a spyglass like that last group," Robin said, grimacing a bit.

She was under quite a bit of pressure, not physically but mentally, helping to keep the Everlasting Resolve from being seen by anyone in the groves around them. Understanding what

so many different eyes and ears were telling her was a tremendous strain on Robin's mind, although she thankfully had quite a bit of practice with it before this. She had gotten into the habit of having at least a few different eyes areas around herself, even when sleeping when Robin was younger. Yet that was different from the number of eyes and ears that Robin was using currently.

"Were coming up to another crossway," Nami reported, speaking of the term where more than two groves almost met, but with enough space between them for the ocean to serve like a river. "Going by Shakky's map, we'll want to turn left here. From then on, it'll be straight or rather, we'll follow the curve of the 'river' going forward. We'll pass two more such crossways, and then we'll stop at a third. Going straight from that point will take us out into the open ocean, but going right, that route will curve backward and take us to the main port of the marine headquarters."

"Roger!" Sanji answered, at the helm currently.

He had recovered somewhat from his earlier morose air but still seemed somewhat hesitant and almost docile, perhaps? Nami wasn't certain how to describe it as she looked over at the utterly changed cook. *Good grief, I know that Makino did well enough with the rest of us, but her makeover of him is really tremendous.*

She wasn't the only one who had noticed, and Franky, coming up from down below deck, paused, turning to look at him instead of speaking to Nami first as he had intended. "What's up, cook? You're looking so weak now, I bet I could beat you with a pinky finger."

"Ugh, don't even joke. I feel weak too. I am afraid that without my dapper looks, without my dashing appearance, my strength has left me. How will the ladies love looking at me as much as they love my food if I don't, if I don't have my signature look!" Sanji replied, almost incoherent as he began to blubber, drooping at the helm.

The move nearly had the ship scraping along the side of the Grove to starboard, and Marguerite, who had been watching him worriedly from one side, hastily reached forward, taking over the tiller and pulling the ship back into the center of the 'river'. She did not see the little foot appearing and kicking him in the ass from below. "Seriously, what is wrong with you, Sanji? Your looks are not that important. Your strength is self-evident, as is your skill," she grumbled, kicking him lightly in the shin.

To her surprise, Sanji stumbled, shaking his leg out as if that little kick had actually hurt. He then worked it into a very weak version of his usual Mellorine dance yet still looked somewhat morose. "I think you for those kind words, but as a gallant knight, I do have an image I must maintain at all times. My looks right now are insufficient to that... as much as I delighted in the attention Makino gave me when creating my new appearance."

Rolling her eyes, Nami hoped that Sanji got over whatever was really bothering him if they ran into any trouble. For now, she was just happy that it had cut out his normal Mellorine attitude, which would undoubtedly help distancing his current persona from his normal character. With that in mind, she decided to throw him a bone. “Just keep us on course, Sanji, and remember, both Perona and I are looking to you to defend us if we run into trouble.”

Marguerite scowled at her feeling a little jealous for some reason, but Sanji hopped to attention, actually saluting as both of his eyes seemed to turn to hearts. “Yes! Don’t worry Nami-chwan, your mighty Knight will still be able to defend you, no matter what ailment I am currently dealing with!”

From where she was lounging about nearby, Perona scoffed but didn’t say anything. She would have much preferred to have Zoro around rather than Sanji. Despite styling herself as the Ghost Princess, the whole Knight on a white charger thing had never really done anything for her. No, she was more into the bad boys turned good kind of theme, which Zoro matched much better than Sanji. Still, she understood that she had a role to play in this plan of theirs, and Perona would do it, even if she wasn’t quite certain whether or not she would remain with the Straw Hats afterward. Perona liked Zoro well enough, but she wasn’t thinking about everlasting love or settling down permanently or anything. *Still, becoming a part of the Kuja tribe sounds okay, I suppose.*

Chuckling, Franky gestured with one large thumb out onto the main deck. “I finished modifying the waver, Nami. Ya want to have a look?”

Nami nodded eagerly, and Franky left for a second. A moment later, the main cargo hatch opened between the two guns forward of the conning tower, and the modified waver came into view. The boat itself wasn’t any bigger than it had been previously. Still, the engine area had been built up to look like a series of thrusters like from a rocket. The ship’s prow had been painted now to look like that of a shark, with the two original weapons Franky had built into the ship’s boat back in Water 7, poking out of the eyes to either side. But the main work had been done to silence the waver, hence the built-up area around the engine to muffle the noise.

“It looks good, Franky, and I can control it from the controls there at the front?”

“Yep, I changed that around a bit too. Besides putting the controls at the front now, it’s more comfortable to control sitting down. I even added a few cushions, although I had to take the stuffing from that floating dock where we and the Kuja-nee-chans formalized our alliance,” Franky explained. “I also added some more to the weapons up front, so they can be up and down rather than just side to side. “I’m still not happy with the placement, so I might remove them entirely and put them on pintle mounts, but if you meet any other small ships out there, they’ll do just fine as is.”

Nami nodded, walking around the ship, thanking Franky again as she did. Soon though, she was back by the conning tower, looking around them as Sonja leaped down to join her, the two of them talking quietly once more. Sonja was eager to learn whatever she could from her new acquaintance about navigation before they had to split up. And Hancock was busy helping Robin keep a lookout for trouble.

With Sanji at the tiller, and Chopper, Laki, and their two guests having already left, this left Franky and Marigold with nothing to do along with many of the other Kuja. This was a bit of a problem because of the three Kuja officers, Marigold was the one who still had the most problem with the alliance. And it was Franky that she had the most issue with among the Straw Hats. After all, Franky had been the one to beat Marigold unconscious during the battle between the two crews.

However, Marguerite and Aphelandra were aware of this, and the two of them and several of the other Kuja had figured out a way to keep the peace between Marigold and Franky. “Franky, now that we’ve got time, why don’t you tell us what you’re thinking about in terms of the ship you’ll be making for us?”

“Oh, oh, SUUUUPERRRR!” Franky said, taking a pose and reaching down to his stomach, opening it up and reaching inside the small refrigerator. He didn’t just keep cola in there; one of the other items was a large ship’s blueprint he’d begun working on. Setting it down on the main deck, he knelt beside it, gesturing for Marigold and the others around to do the same. “I figured that the size of your crew demands a galley or galleon-style ship. So I devised two different varieties, although I have considered the things I learned while building the Everlasting Resolve. That is a sleeker ship design with higher sides and a thinner prow. I can’t promise that I’ll be able to build a steam engine, that will depend on what kind of resources you all can come up with while we’re staying here in the Archipelago, but if you can narrow it down between a galley and galleon, that would be super. And do you want the ship to have guns like ours or the regular kind?”

Eagerly the Kujas began to shout requests, with Hancock looking on in amusement as the ship continued.

OOOOOO

Of course, there were a few rides that Camie, as a mermaid, couldn’t do. After all, she didn’t have any legs, so she couldn’t go on any ride that demanded that she be put into a holster between said unavailable legs. Most of the time, this meant that she and Hachi waited while Chopper and Laki when on the ride, but at one point, she waited behind the others, not being very hungry as Hachi went off to get food, Chopper took a turn on a bumper cart ride and Laki went to the bathroom.

All of them had been lulled into a false sense of security despite knowing how valuable a mermaid was to the local slave markets. And none of them had noticed they had been watched for some time. Now with Camie left alone, the watchers struck.

Coming back with food for the two of them, Hachi was the only one of the three in position to see the mermaid getting grabbed. He tossed the food to the ground and raced forward, but the humans were too fast and raced towards a nearby waterway onto a skiff that traveled away along the nearby river deeper into the Archipelago. “Nyu! Camie! Get back here, you bastards!”

Behind Hachi, Laki, who was still in the line for the bathroom – some things were truly universal - turned. Seeing the fleeing kidnappers, Laki quickly pulled out her rifle from the bag on her back, knelt, and fired, causing the women in the line to shriek and flee in every direction, spooked by the sudden violence and not seeing what the madwoman with the angel wings was shooting at. Her shot struck clean, killing one of the kidnappers, but the other kept on running away, putting more of the crowd of park-goers between him and the pirates.

“Nyuuuu! Out of the way!” Hachi shouted, battering some of the slower people aside. The six arms hidden under his shirt burst out from around his middle, ruining his disguise.

As he ran, the cry of “Fishman!” joined the tumult, and people began to run even faster than they had before. But there were still too many people around for a moment for Laki to fire again, and she cursed, racing forward after Hachi. *Damn it, I should have brought a bag for my skates!*

Previously unaware of what was going on, Chopper had heard the sound of the gunshots and the screams. Wondering what was going on but believing, with some justification, that his crew and their friends were involved in some way, he pulled out of the bumper car, hopping up onto the car of a young kid who had just rammed him. The next moment, he was leaping out of the area via Geppo, ignoring the shocked looks from the people around him.

At that point, Hachi was through the crowd of bystanders and was closing on the sole living kidnapper. But then he reached the waterway he had been racing toward, leaping down onto a boat there where several other men were waiting. Once the mermaid was aboard, the ship started to pull away, moving by a series of waterwheels and a small, very loud steam engine. The men on the boat fired up at Hachi, causing him to stumble back for a second to avoid the fusillade.

But once the kidnappers had fired, he jumped down towards the boat. “Nyuuu! I’m gonna drownNNGHHH!”

Hachi’s words were interrupted as an arrow fired by one of the men waiting on the boat struck one of his arms. He was a massive man, easily a head taller than Franky, and just

was wide, so the arrow fired from a bow this man could use actually hurt more than common musket balls would have as it struck.

But Hachi didn't stop. It did knock him off-course, though, and coupled with the ship already moving, Hachi missed, landing in the water. Once more, this didn't stop him and he began swimming with the speed of an Octopus, a thin trail of blood visible behind him for a moment.

Most of the other men on the boat joined the large one in firing into the water while the boat continued to pull away, gaining speed, moving quickly through the water as a few more blood trails appeared, the arrows and musket balls finding their target in the octopus man's body. Soon, Hachi was forced to surface, a heavy arrow from the massive man having caught him in the side of his head. The blow had torn through his toughened Fishman skin, and the wound was bleeding heavily, much to Camie's shrieking shock. "Ha-chan!!!"

"Nyu, Nyu, Camie!!" Hachi moaned, but he was seeing double now when he could see at all through the blood obscuring his vision.

Laki had followed behind Hachi, leaving the amusement park as the starfish man clung to Laki's shoulder. As she had raced after Hachi, the Skypiean woman taking potshots with her current rifle, a poor imitation of her original, so much so that her next few shots missed wide and high despite the lack of living obstacles between them. Within moments though, the speed of the boat had the boat rapidly out of sight, entering a series of confluences.

At that point, Chopper finally arrived, looking extremely guilty, and stared towards where the boat had been. He had seen it disappear under the foliage of the Yarukiman mangroves. Now he transformed into his Heavy point mode, his clothing expanding to contain his new form, if somewhat skintight. Laki also noticed his eyepatch change from a cutesy-looking heart to a large, angry-looking x-shape.

In his Heavy point, Chopper hopped down towards the water, bouncing there with Geppo as he grabbed one of Hachi's flailing arms and pulled the octopus-man out of the water. "What should we do?" he asked worriedly.

Laki growled, kicking the ground angrily. "What can we do? I might be armed, but I didn't bring along my dial skates, and I'd wager Hachi's got a concussion at least, so we don't have a local guide to tell us where to go. And I didn't study the map Shakky and Nami were going over, did you? All I know is the lower the number, the worse it is."

When the doctor shook his head as he bent to examine Hachi's head, she went on angrily. "In that case, there's only one thing we can do. We have to tell the others was going on and hope that someone is in a position to rescue Camie. Come on, Carry Hachi and let's find an out-of-the-way place we can call and help without being overheard. After that, we'll head back

to where we parked the flying fish. Maybe Nami will have time to direct us to at least the number of the Grove they might take her to.”

OOOOOOO

About an hour before Camie was kidnapped, the *Everlasting Resolve* had come as close as the pirates dared to take the large ship to the marine base. At that point, using the revamped waver, Sanji, Perona, and Nami left, heading to starboard. There, they moved slowly, watching the sides of the river. There, every hundred feet or so at hand appeared, giving them a thumbs up or an open palm sign indicating they should wait. With that and the Den Den Mushi to communicate more information, they crept forward unseen under several bridges large and small connecting one grove to another. Soon they spotted a turning in the river, where Robin told them to halt.

Pulling up against the side of the river there, Perona sent out to ghosts to move around the ship, ready to deal with anyone who might come along and spot them. Thankfully, while portions of the Archipelago were well-populated, the majority of it wasn't, and this segment was felt to be too close to the marine headquarters for most people except those whose business meant they worked directly with the marines. Even law-abiding citizens didn't like the police being around twenty-four-seven, especially in a place like this, where the marines were more often than not simply tools of whatever Tenryubito or rich lordling could pay them.

This allowed them to see the front of the Marine headquarters, which was built up in an area of Grove 66. All around this Grove, there were separate docks for different Marine vessels, several of whom were now currently filled, but the pride of place went to the interior position. There, a battleship rested, built along much of the same lines as the bombardment battleships that Laki, Luffy, and the original Resolve had been forced to fight during the Buster Call on Water 7. But instead of having guns that could traverse upward and fire at an angle, this ship had only two turrets rather than three, and one gun per turret, a much larger gun than the two artillery cannons on normal marine battleships. And from the top of the tallest mast also blew a personal ensign that none of them had seen before.

“What the hell? I didn't think Marines mostly went in for that kind of specialized ship,” Nami scowled, biting her lip as she pulled away from the spyglass, letting Sanji look through it.

Perona shrugged. “You can only personalize your battleship when you're a vice admiral or above. But there are a lot of vice admirals out there, some of them more dangerous than others. Although I can't say I'm really an expert recognizing their symbols or anything.”

“Nami-chwan, the officer in question seems to be haranguing the troops over there, although I can't see anything through the crowd of them.”

“Wait, what?” Nami hastily took the spyglass back from Sanji and realized she had concentrated too much on the view of the ships and the base, completely skipping over the

events happening in the base's courtyard. From this angle they couldn't really see much, but she could make out what looked like a crowd of marines standing at attention in lines, and several of them were at least flinching at whatever was going on in the front. "Wow, whoever's in there seems to be laying down the law something fierce."

Reporting this via the crew's Den Den Mushi, Nami asked if Robin or Hancock could tell them anything. But Hancock couldn't reach that far with her Kenbunshoku, and Robin couldn't tell her anything yet. She was worried about getting her eyes or ears spotted if she moved too quickly. She would have a few in place soon, but Robin had to carefully choose each one moving forward now that they were within sight of the target, and the Marines had people on watch on the outer wall of their base.

This warning that they were did nothing to dissuade Nami's curiosity, and she wondered aloud, "Still, I wonder what's going on over there..."

OOOOOOO

"You are the sorriest lot of marines I have seen in years! Fix those uniform sailors! You, forth back five in from the right. You just picked your nose, picked your nose in a parade! Drop out and give me fifty!"

Two of Gion's sailors moved towards the luckless sailor, pushing them out of line and standing over him as he began to perform push-ups, while others continued to prowl through the lines of the marine garrison who had been ordered out into parade formation by Gion almost upon her arrival. They pointed out mistakes in a softer tone of voice, providing the gentle officer to Gion's current angry officer character, but that was definitely not the soft option for the Marines who drew their eye.

Several other sailors caught Gion's attention as she stalked from one side of the parade ground to another, not moving through the crowd, simply staying at the front, her voice and attitude drawing every eye as her officers moved among the sailors. The harangue went on for several moments in a similar vein, and then she turned her ire on the garrison's officers, getting in their faces and bellowing at them about how they had let standards slip.

She wound down for a moment as a troop from her ship came out of the Garrison building. "Bosun Cheri, report on your findings," she ordered, her tone almost conversational now as she addressed her own people.

"Ma'am! All mobile cannons are present and accounted for. We have twenty-four grapeshot canisters for each and two small ammunition carts. The wheels on some cannons need tender loving care, and I recommend leaving six behind. But the majority of them are good to go. We have so far examined eight hundred of the muskets within the armory. All of them have checked out bar twelve, which had obviously been left out in the weather too often. The Garrisons gunpowder is... only okay. There isn't nearly as much on hand as regulation states

there should be for a base of this size. The same goes for musket ammunition. Not nearly as much as there should be in terms of regulations, but we should make do.”

“Well, Commodore, do you have anything to say? Where your missing gunpowder could be, for instance?” Gion asked, her voice almost gentle as she spoke to the officer in question, a rather florid-faced man who looked about ten or fifteen years older than her, none of whom had been kind to him.

The man wiped at his face with a dripping handkerchief, sweating from more than just the heat. “Well, sometimes marine ships come by and, well they are, they are low on their own supplies. We fill them up as required, after all, we don’t, that is, we’re not supposed to, there is an unspoken rule that--”

“There is no such thing as an unspoken rule to a marine! There are only regulations, justice and the laws of the World Government!” Gion bellowed interrupting the man, getting in his face so quickly that the man stumbled backward. Many a man would’ve loved for Gion to be so close to them as she was to him just a moment ago, but not in the mood she was in at present. “And if you have passed on your own reserves to ships coming in, that should be in your log. If my bursar does not find that to be the case, Commodore, I’m going to see that ranks stripped from you and then shoved your rectum so hard you will be squealing for weeks!”

She growled at the man for a moment, then backed away, looking over at her bo’sun again. “But in your opinion, they have enough material to join us?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Excellent. Form two work parties, bring out the heavy weapons. Lieutenant Daniels, choose a work party of ten. Start bringing up the ammunition. Lieutenant Archibald, you’re in charge of the squad left five aboard the ship. Choose another team of five to help our bursar review the paperwork in the base. You know who to pick.”

As her officers hopped to obey, the local Commodore found his courage, asking tremulously, “Vice Admiral, Miss, I, um, what exactly are you...”

“**We**, commodore, will clean up the Archipelago, starting from here and marching outward. We’ll send groups out in every direction, small bands to find trouble spots, and then bring the hammer down on each trouble spot in turn. I trust you know that there have been reports that several of the Supernovas... you do know the term, yes? The rookie pirates of more than 100 million beli apiece? Well, if the reports are accurate, most of them are here in this Archipelago. And I mean to capture as many of them as we can.”

The Commodore licked dry lips. “I, far be it for me to question you, but, but there are a few Tenryubito here at present, led by Saint Rosward. Perhaps, perhaps we should wait until they leave? If we even inconvenienced them then...”

“We won’t get in their way,” Gion growled, shaking her head. “And we’ll stay away from the human auction house, which I’m presuming is the reason why they’re here. Surely, you’ve been keeping in contact with the security detail? So long as that line of communication is open, we can follow their position well enough and stay away.”

Moments later, Gion held a Den Den Mushi connected to the local communications network and had confirmed that for her own satisfaction. She had to smirk a bit at the fact that one of the freaking fishbowl wearers had been forced back to his ship due to his own incompetence dressing himself that morning. *Although I doubt he actually does dress, it’s more like one of his slaves had to do it for him. Someone got a little careless, or maybe a little murderous, and will probably pay the penalty for it. Pity.*

Despite the acerbic tone of that thought, Gion knew that the wrongs of the Tenryubito were well out of her own paygrade. Regardless, she had the information she needed. The other two were already moving towards the human auction house at Grove 1. There were other reports of a few Supernova being spotted within the middle numbers, so that would be where Gion would start her sweep.

With that confirmed, she stared down her nose at the Marine Commodore in front of her. “Well, what are you still doing standing there? Move your rear-echelon ass! I want you and your men ready to march with us in an hour, or else I’ll bump you back to cabin boy and send you to work in Impel Down!”

Just as they were about to set off, one of the men from her ship Gion had put on duty in the coms room came in, racing towards Gion with a snail in his hand, holding it out to her. “Admiral, we just got a report from a spy elsewhere in the archipelago of something going on. One of the Supernovas, Trafalgar Law, is fighting someone else!” He moved closer, whispering as he continued while the Vice Admiral snatched away the snail. “The description of the second fighter is a little... worrying.”

Bringing the Den Den Mushi to her mouth, Gion spoke into it, noting the creature’s appearance of a long, drooping mustache and deep-set, bloodshot eyes. *Good grief, whoever this informant is needs either a week of sleep or a coffee the size of this base.* “This is Vice Admiral Gion. Talk to me,” she ordered crisply.

“V, v, vice Admiral!? The voice shouted from the other side, its bloodshot eyes widening in shock as the previously tired expression shifted to one of fear and awe. “That’s, I...”

The voice stumbled to a halt, but Gion only let it continue for a few seconds before barking out. “Out with it, man!”

“Yes, Miss! That is yes, Admiral, I, I...” Another shout from Gion followed, but the man seemed to find his spine this time and continued with only a few stutters. “I watched the supernova Trafalgar Law be challenged by the pirate hunter, Zoro. T, they were fighting for a

long while, and um, made a real mess of one of the unemployed deportation zones. They seem to have stopped fighting now and simply gone their separate ways. That was about... ten minutes ago. I couldn't get away right away to tell you."

Gion's eyes narrowed at the name of the Pirate Hunter, and for a second, she scowled, wondering if Hancock had lied to the marines about what had happened in the Florian Triangle. But then she remembered that the report had actually stated that Hancock had not known what it happened to several of the Straw Hat crew. *I'm still of two minds about that whole operation, but what's done is done, and given what was going on behind closed doors.*

The vice admiral held back a shiver. As the special protégé of Tsuru, Gion was privy to several secrets that even marines like Garp, Aokiji and Sengoku were not. In the case of Sengoku, that was quite deliberate on the Buddha's part. And one thing she knew was that while Tsuru had been the one to plan out the Anti-Straw Hat operation on the heels of Akainu's fuckup, she hadn't wanted to push it. But someone in the World Government had sent her secret orders to do so while Tsuru had been researching the odd blue-energy power that Luffy had been reported to use.

The secret order wasn't the issue. It was the fact even Tsuru had no idea who had given her the order, that scared Gion. She had seen her 'I left my last fucks to give behind twenty years ago' role model argues back against Sengoku, Kong, and more than one of the Gorosei. But she hadn't even tried to discover who was giving her this order for some reason. That was beyond worrisome.

Shaking that thought off, Gion allowed a wolfish smirk to cross her face. *Still, if Zoro is as good as reports say, at least I'll get a good sword fight out of this trip. And this is proof that Law is here too. He's another one the world government wants, even if he isn't known so much as a swordsman.* "Where are you, and why did they stop fighting?" Pirates fighting in the first place was far less mysterious than two such powerhouses just walking away from one another.

"I saw Zoro speaking on a Den Den Mushi, and then Law recruiting some of the unemployed they let loose, but that's about it. And the fight was in Grove 27."

Gion's teeth ground at that, knowing that was a euphemism for slaves, and although she didn't know much about the layout of the Shabondy Archipelago, she knew that there were several places around it that handled the inflow of slaves to the auction house. Naturally, not all of the slaves would be kept in the same place. Even with the number of explosive collars the Auction House used, the more slaves meant a greater danger of an uprising. *And hasn't the Auction House here had some issues with losing those things the past few years?*

Regardless of that, Gion knew that slavery was just part of the world. It was allowed under the law, and the Tenryubito always needed their toys. She might not like it, but she couldn't do anything about it. *Still, if Law is looking to recruit prisoners, he'll eventually make his way to the auction house... Crap. Which is the most likely place for the be-bowled retards to be.*

Well, at least knowing where my sweep should end makes things easier. "Can you tell me if they went up-number or down-number?"

In the archipelago, those were the directions used to indicate where someone was going within the multitude of tiny, semi-artificial groves.

"They were both heading down, Mistress. Although, um... the Pirate Hunter said he was, but then turned the wrong way... It could be he tried to throw off someone else following him or just didn't want to go in the same direction as Law."

"Hmm... yes. The fact they stopped fighting is surprising enough without the idea they'd travel in the same direction afterward," Gion murmured before going on more decisively. "You've done well, agent. Your regular fee will be doubled from the garrison coffers." With that, she hung up and gestured to the Marines around here, ignoring the spluttering from the base commandant. "We have a target, boys! We're going to finish off the last of the Straw Hats and take any of the Supernovas and their crews into custody too!"

Her own men cheered heartily at that, while the response from the local marines was a bit more ragged. That was fine, Gion thought. So long as they obeyed her orders, they didn't have to be enthusiastic about it.

Leading the way out of the headquarters, Marine Garrison, Gion suddenly paused as the artillery pastor, pulled by a series of men and mules on ultralight cards, followed by its artillery train. Her eyes narrowed, and catching her look, her first mate moved up to her, keeping his tone neutral. "Admiral, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing, I just, for a moment, I thought I saw something like an ear on that wall over there." Scowling, she glared at the offending wall, then around her, but didn't see anything else. "Never mind, it must have been a trick of the light. Come on," she said, shrugging her shoulders and clapping her first mate on the shoulder. "Let's get going. We've got pirates to hunt."

He grinned and turned to bellow encouragement at the men as Gion took her place at the front of the march.

OOOOOO

"Whoever that woman is, I think she almost spotted my eyes or one of my ears," Robin announced from a mouth which appeared at the bottom of the waver, which really needed a name, Nami reflected.

"What do you mean?" the orangeite asked.

“I did tell you that my eyes and so forth are not invisible, Navigator-chan. And someone does not become a vice-admiral without incredible situational awareness. Indeed, I think we should be thankful she decided not to try and follow up on her momentary paranoia with Kenbunshoku. Vice Admirals all have to have some skill with that ability. Just to be on the safe side, I’d recommend pulling back and out towards the sea for a few moments while they continue to decamp.”

“As with everything that Robin-chan says, that sound like excellent advice to me!” Sanji was enthused, although his first reaction to there being a female officer over there had been to nearly hog the spyglass until Nami pinched his ears to get him to let go.

The small group of pirates did just that, using the waver to move back and away from the marine base for a moment, hugging the coast of the grove for several minutes. Nami made small talk with Perona most of the time, finding the girl a good source of information on Grand Line fashion, the societies of a few of the islands she’d been on and a few other things.

Why the pink-haired girl liked Zorro was a tiny bit of a mystery but not one that Nami was willing to delve into. Nami knew she was. She had seen the two of them together a few times cuddling, or rather Perona cuddling, while Zoro just took it stoically and had even seen them kiss once. But again, that mystery was for when they weren’t doing anything, and Sanji wasn’t around. His interruptions would get old quickly.

After five minutes passed, Robin could report that most of the Marines were now out of sight, marching deeper into the archipelago. “I imagine they would be trouble for any regular pirate crew, and I honestly am uncertain if I like Zoro’s chances alone against a Vice Admiral. They are a tricky lot normally,” Robin reported. “Still, I suppose that fits with our overall plan.”

Nami nodded, then glanced back over to Perona as she lounged at the other side of the small boat. “Are you—”

She was interrupted by the Den Den Mushi going off, causing all three of the passengers of the waver to twitch before Sanji reached forward quickly. “This is Sanji. What’s... Chopper, hold on, calm down. Calm...” the still somewhat depressed chef shook his head. “You know what, why don’t you just give the snail to Laki, then I can both hear her beautiful voice, and she can probably give me an explanation of what you’re trying to blubber.”

“Kind of harsh there, Sanji-kun,” Nami growled, kicking Sanji’s side lightly. She watched in amusement as he nearly fell onto his side despite how light the kick had been to the normal attacks he took from Luffy and the others during training. *Now is he just overreacting because I’m a woman, or is he really feeling that weak? I remember Marguerite nearly flattening him earlier with her pat on the back.*

“Sanji, we ran into trouble here,” Laki’s voice interrupted Nami’s thoughts, sounding both out of breath and worried.

This caused Sanji to straighten up, some of his normal 'Mellorine!' attitude coming back. "Tell us what has happened, oh Angel! Whose head do I have to kick in for spoiling your day!?"

"That's actually one of your more accurate flirts, Sanji," the young woman drawled, sounding a bit more grounded than a moment before. "Because we do seem to need some heads kicked in."

After Laki explained, the three pirates on the waver scowled, even Perona. While she didn't care so much for Camie as a friend or anything, the idea she was just snatched up like that right off the streets disturbed her. "And you haven't been able to contact Zoro?" Perona demanded.

"No, but we will keep trying," Chopper answered, his voice a bit distant and the Den Den Mushi's face not changing. "We're back on the flying fish now, and we will try to circle the area and see if we can figure out where they went, but if we can't, we might have to trust to luck, and well, none of us know where they could go."

"The Auction House," Nami answered instantly, scowling. But her scowl faded quickly as she looked at Sanji. "Do you remember the grove number where Hancock said the auction house was supposed to be?"

"Yes, Nami-chwan," Sanji said with a nod. "I believe that was Grove number one."

Nami looked down at her hands, then over at Perona before looking over at the watching eyes of Robin, before nodding abruptly. "Go, Sanji."

Sanji looked at her in confusion, and she smirked, gesturing to his new look. "Get rid of the new look and get on your way to Grove number one. You can just Geppo all the way, can't you?"

"Er, probably," he answered, looking both ecstatic at the chance to play knight to Camie and get back to his normal look and yet also worried. But what if you and the fair flower with the horrible taste in men run into trouble?"

"Hey!" Perona barked. "Just because I like a guy, I don't have to fight for mirror time with, doesn't mean I have bad taste in men."

"Debatable," Sanji and Nami said as one before looking at one another with a snort.

"Go," Nami ordered, pointing away. "This way, you can save Camie and then get captured by the Marines too and the crew will have all three of our best fighters at ground zero for this mad plan of ours."

Sanji nodded and then hopped up into the air, ascending rapidly out of sight, heading back to the ship for the quickest fashion change in the history of the world.

When he was gone, Nami sighed once more, then smacked her cheeks with both hands. *Right, Nami. No leaning on the boys to watch your back. This is something only you can do, so let's get on with it.* "Robin, are the last of the Marines gone?"

"So far. I can't spread my powers into the base from here, but I don't see any Marines outside on patrol any longer. But standard doctrine says there should be at least a platoon left behind at all times. Too many for me to get away with using my conjured limbs or eyes inside," Robin warned.

Robin's Toile D'yeux (Web of Eyes) was somewhat limited in that she could not concentrate on more than a few hundred eyes before she gave herself a nasty migraine. The same went with hearing. So, the trick was to continually spread out her eyes, finding really good vantage points for each. But if those eyes were seen, well, this was a world with Devil Fruit powers, and the marines knew all too well about her powers. If they spotted one of her limbs or eyes, they would know she was still alive, which would be bad considering the plan going forward.

The same general rule went for her use of her limbs and carrying things, only worse. After all, eyes and ears were small things, forearms not so much.

Nami had known that before agreeing to this mission, though, and she nodded. "Perona, do it."

"Don't get used to giving me orders, Cat Burglar," Perona jested good-naturedly as she gestured. Several ghosts formed out of her palms, growing slowly.

For just a moment, Nami thought that the girl might just be betraying them, but she didn't. Instead, Perona's ghosts grew to Hollow Ghost size and flew out towards the base, keeping low and skimming across the water surrounding the base for a moment until they passed through the outer walls and into the fortress. Closing her eyes, Perona saw through the senses of her ghosts, much like Robin with her various conjured-up eyes and ears. Perona had to be careful since ghosts were not invisible and were much more visible than small eyeballs popping up in darkened corners. But unlike Robin's hands, Perona's ghosts wouldn't lead back to the Straw Hats, and they could use their Negative powers on any unlucky marine to run into them.

The ghosts passed through the walls, sticking their heads out here and there, finding only a few scattered Marines on the first floor, moving around the gun sights. But there were several more on the second, cleaning, polishing and otherwise trying to make the base's cannons look better than the half-ignored junk they seemed to be. Horohorohoro, *seems that marine lady laid down the law for sure.*

As her Negative Hollows moved around, Perona described the layout of the face to Nami, who memorized it easily. Meanwhile, the waver had been moving forward slowly and silently under the navigator's direction and was soon right alongside the Marine Garrison. Thanks to the marines being too busy cleaning to keep a lookout, she got there with no marines seeing them. Perona directed her to the back of the base, where there were no cannons and, therefore, no marines near windows.

"Okay, let's see if Laki knew what she was talking about," Nami muttered, pointing a dial-based grapnel at a window on the third floor of the garrison. Firing, the weapon only made a loud 'phoot!' noise, which didn't carry very far over the sound of the waves, and Nami smiled thinly. "Well, that worked at least."

Tying it around her waist, Nami then pressed the center of the iron cloud dial, which instantly began to roll itself up, pulling her upwards to the third-story room whose window she had just left, and she easily pulled herself over the windowsill and into the building. "Whew, that was kind of cool."

The ghost that had been on watch there bottled in the air, letting out that strange Hollow-Hollow noise that sounded like Perona laughing, only much lower in pitch. It pointed one way along the hall, while Perona's voice came through it. "That way, the base only has that single stairwell. I haven't seen any sign of the room that we're supposed to find here, so I have to think it's on the fourth floor. I haven't gotten up that far though. My ghosts are keeping an eye on the patrols on the second floor and the stairwell."

"Good thinking. Use this one to watch my back, and let's hope we can get through this with no one the wiser," Nami ordered, patting a small bag at her side, where a spare Log Pose they had taken from the Flying Fish Pirates sat. "And then Perona, when this is all over, you and I can hit the town for a shopping spree."

"Horohorohoro, I'll hold you to that," the ghost answered and passed through the door a moment later, looking this way and that.

When Nami opened the door, however, she realized there would be a few problems with this infiltration, that being the noise of hinges. When she opened the door, it creaked loudly, and she froze, crouching down and sticking her head out, straining her senses to the utmost for any sign the noise had carried.

After a few seconds, it looked as if no one had heard the noise, and Nami moved on.

She was able to get up to the fourth floor of the base with ease, but there she was forced to hide almost immediately. Some niggling sense told her that the first door she came to was about to open before the latch even began to move.

A marine walked out of the room, but Nami moved with all the quickness of a cat, moving to one side and leaping upwards, desperately grabbing at the top of the door as it opened towards her. With her hands secure on the top of the moving door, Nami flipped herself up and over the man in a show of acrobatics that she would never have been able to pull off before training with Luffy for so long. She landed on the other side noiselessly behind the man, then rolled into the now empty room as the marine turned to close the door behind him while Perona's ghost flew upwards through the ceiling.

"Huh... could have sworn I saw something," the marine muttered before ensuring his belt was secure and shrugged. "Just my imagination."

In the room the marine had vacated, Nami lay gasping. "That was too close!" But as she breathed in, Nami gagged as the room's smell hit her. For this was the privy for this floor of the base. "OH yuck!" she grumbled, keeping her voice low with an effort of will. "Luffy better realize the effort this whole thing is taking..."

Even as she muttered, however, her senses told her someone else was coming. Looking around, she saw that the outer wall had a window, and thanking the fates that she had no fear of heights, Nami leaped over. Jumping out, she turned, grabbing onto the windowsill and scrabbling upwards to perch above the window much like her cat burglar nickname.

Two marines trooped into the room, and there was a brief murmur of conversation and a hissing noise. Nami waited until she heard the sound of the door closing, then cautiously lowered herself back into the room, watching as the ghost that had been trailing her came out of the roof. "Nice reflexes, Nami."

"Thanks," Nami answered dryly, moving forward once more down the hallway. "That doesn't mean I wanted to exercise them so much."

At the next doorway, she glanced and found four marines operating what looked like the communication center for the base. Then she was past, heading to the one remaining door on this floor. *Let this be! If not, I'm going to be really annoyed!*

Thankfully for Nami's nerves, when she opened the door, she discovered precisely what they were looking for. Inside were several dozen small jewelry cases set to display their goods on raised shelves around the narrow storage room almost. Within each velvet box lay an Eternal Pose. There were dozens of them, each marked with the name of a different Marine base in Paradise with a small gold plaque.

"This is it!" Nami hissed, pumping her fist into the air, fighting back an urge to giggle manically and grab as many of the Eternal Poses she could. *My god, the amount of help these things could give me in making a real-world map! But, but no, it's time for sneaky, not smash and grabby. That will come later, maybe. I hope.* Thrusting those thoughts aside, she moved forward, hands outstretched. "Now, to switch it with this one..."

Pulling out a small screwdriver courtesy of Franky, Nami moved forward and found the Eternal Pose they wanted. Unscrewing the plaque, she looked beneath and saw the name burnt into the wood underneath, which matched the name on the plaque. A moment later, she screwed the plaque into the Log Pose she had brought along before setting it back down in its box. The Eternal Pose went into her bag, and Nami gave the Negative Hollow a thumbs up, which the apparition returned.

Getting out was even more harrowing than getting in. One of the men on patrol on the first floor came up to shoot the breeze with the three on communications duty and nearly caught Nami in the stairwell. After that, Nami found two men working on the hinges of the door to the room where she had initially entered the base. While some of her was snippily pleased by this, the rest wanted to club each marine in this base to death for the trouble this was causing her. But thanks to her own senses and the Negative Hollow, she could get past, ducking into another room before she could be spotted.

But then the two marines began to talk about doing all the doors, and with a groan of frustration, Nami dove out of the window again, out into the ocean below.

“Hey, did you hear something?” one of the marines asked. His fellow shook his head, and after a moment, apathy won out once more. If Gion had left her own troops behind, they might have investigated and would have been patrolling the entire base in a more organized fashion. As it was, the local’s lack of martial will worked for the pirates.

Nami’s dive had been somewhat thrown off by her two burdens, but she could swim almost as well as Sanji, and after she got back to the surface, swimming over to the waver was no real hardship. Perona, her Negative Hollows canceled out of existence, pulled Nami onto the side of the waver, where Nami quickly took control, piloting the little ship through the waves and exchanging a high five with the girl, who grinned. “You know, me and maybe Robin-nee-sama make one heck of a team when it comes to thieving. We might want to look into that in the future, yeah?”

Perona was in complete agreement and, as they pulled away from the base, shouted out, “All your treasure belong to us!” causing both herself and Nami to double over in laughter while a slightly more mature chortle came from the mouth of Robin as it appeared on the waver.

“I take it that the mission was a success?” the older woman asked.

“Yep!” Nami said, holding the device she had taken up to an eye that just appeared so that Robin could read out the marks on it. The name at the bottom of the Eternal Pose was Enies Lobby. “That’s our part done. Now it’s all up to the boys and Luffy’s acting ability.”

End Chapter

And so we begin the Archipelago Arc. I don't think it will be a very long one, considering how much we've already covered, so perhaps a pseudo-arc would serve better as a label? Regardless, I hope you guys enjoyed this and are looking forward to more.

Also: **I am only bones. Grammarly wished me to change this to I am only boning...**