

Chapter 31: Shadowy Maneuvers

From the moment Luffy and the two Shichibukai clashed, an observer used to Luffy's normal style, should such a being be able to survive in the vicinity with his mind intact, might well have noticed how serious he was taking this battle. For one thing, there was no taunting. For another, Luffy's face closed down. There was no smirk visible, nor even a hint of the pure, wild enjoyment he normally took in even the toughest fights. Luffy was a combat junky, after all. But none of that was visible now as he launched himself forward, just a glare of pure, focused determination.

He's fast! Both of the Shichibukai had barely time to think before Luffy was on Kuma, a hammer blow crashing into his chest before the man could even raise his hands. While the punch didn't do any actual harm, Kuma stumbled back, and Luffy used the momentum of that to bounce up into the air, lashing out with a hammer kick at his head.

At the same time, Luffy noticed that some of the nearby shadows seemed to be moving oddly. *Well, crap, Gecko's shadow's already back!? I thought I'd get a bit more of a break from him than that.*

But then Luffy had no concentration to spare on the shadows as Kuma raised his hand, pushing out his palm and sending a paw-shaped air attack Luffy's way. "Pad Ho."

Hastily Luffy redirected his entire body using a single leg Geppo to bounce around Kuma's attack before being forced to flip in midair to avoid a similar beam from Hancock. *Thank goodness those attacks of Hancock's aren't heart seeking or something.* Luffy then had to dodge Kuma as he launched himself into the air, moving faster and more quietly than anyone using Geppo should've been able to. As he moved, Kuma thrust his palms forward in a style reminiscent of a sumo wrestler, but faster and with slightly more variety in the angle of each blow.

"My word but you are good," Hancock said, as she too launched herself into the air, lashing out with a kick. "Still quite arrogant, though."

Luffy didn't reply as he was forced to block it, then watched as she flipped herself as he had done a moment ago, winking at him as she flipped away. Again, only Luffy's thoughts on his frozen girlfriend kept him from reacting as he dodged between air blasts from Kuma and a beam from Hancock.

"After all, you are not the only one with Haoshoku." With that, Boa glared at Straw Hat, and her own Haoshoku crashed out, pushing at his, startling him so much he barely dodged Kuma's next attacks.

Luffy found himself flung sideways when the compressed air blast crashed into the ground with explosive force. But Luffy recovered quickly, lashing out in every direction with his Railgun rounds.

Once more, Hancock's arms and legs were covered with Busoshoku, smacking the attacks aside. There was a feral smile on her face, as Boa had seen his consternation (Raffy's poker face was still atrocious in his new life). She chuckled even as she batted aside the nails which had previously sunk battleships as if Luffy's attack was as dangerous as so many flies. "Did you honestly think that a Shichibukai would not have run into someone with Haoshoku before, or indeed that you are the only one of us who is able to use it? We're not all as weak as Crocodile."

Luffy snorted, some of his seriousness breaking. "Huh, the Grand Line is the only place a person able to turn into sand could ever be thought of as weak."

Boa laughed once more with a slight nod of her head even as Kuma redirected the attacks shot his way, bouncing them back toward Luffy. But he had anticipated that and danced in between them. Before Hancock could intervene, he was once more under Kuma's guard, a blow landing in the man's stomach sent him flying. But Kuma instantly righted himself and came back on the attack like a meteor, forcing Luffy away as Hancock also attacked at range by launching several Mero Mero beams towards Luffy, bracketing him for Kuma.

It didn't work. Luffy's ability to dodge in midair and Geppo let him act like a bouncy ball in midair, with some of the debris from Kuma's attack smacked back into his face, blinding him for a moment.

Seeing this, Boa charged forwards as well, lashing out with kicks and punches. Each time they connected, her legs and limbs would grow black for just a second before impact, the woman conserving her Haki with the ease of long practice as Luffy did the same. Boa knew that this would be a long fight and wouldn't exhaust herself prematurely.

Even as he was dealing with Boa's attack, Luffy saw Kuma didn't seem to have Haki at all, he was just insanely durable. Every time Luffy's blows hit him, usually on the forearm or elbow, the man didn't even blink despite Luffy's own limbs being covered with Busoshoku. *What the hell is he made of!?*

Worse for the martial artist turned pirate, Luffy could also not read Kuma at all from his physical cues. Kuma just didn't have many. His expression didn't change, and the rest of Kuma's body barely shifted. Only his shoulders and arms moved when he thrust forward with his palm strikes, always the same regardless of what kind of blow he was launching. Thankfully Kuma also didn't seem to use his legs except for Geppo, making him vulnerable from below, but beyond that, he didn't have any other weakness.

He also seemed to adapt slightly as the fight went on, making Luffy scowl angrily, as more of his attacks and attempts to get up or around Kuma were blocked or deflected, and more of Kuma's air attacks seemed to become timed to go off hit or miss, hurling Luffy around. *Thank God my aerial style is at least messing with Hancock! If both of them could adapt so quickly, I would be having an even worse time of IT!*

A spectral hand grabbed Luffy's leg interrupting his thoughts and pulling him down, and into a blow from Hancock that sent Luffy's head backward, causing blood to spurt out from a broken nose which began to heal itself thanks to Luffy's ki. *Grah, forgot about the shadow fucker!* Kuma too launched a blow, but Luffy dodged wiggling around it, grabbing the man's arm and then using a Busoshoku-imbued punch to disengage from the shadow, the blow blasting through it, only for the shadow to reform.

"Dammit! it's like fighting silly putty!" Luffy grumbled.

"What in the world is silly putty?" Boa quipped before landing a blow that caused Luffy to grunt in pain, frowning a bit as that was all the reaction she got, despite not seeing any sign of Busoshoku. "You're remarkably hard, you know."

"That's what she said," Luffy said, causing her to blink, completely opening herself for a kick that sent her flying away. The shadow shifted into Brick Bat, biting at Luffy from every direction and again opening Luffy for an attack from Kuma.

Luckily, the angle was such that Kuma's attempt to blow Luffy away simply sent him crashing into the remnants of the wall directly behind him. And through the wall admittedly, but even so, Luffy was able to hop to his feet, lashing out at the bats, sending them away to splatter and reform again, then charging forward, kicking a piece of debris up into Kuma's face. Kuma swatted it away, the thing disappearing instantly, and intoned softly, "Tsuppari Pad Ho!" thrusting his other hand forward's several times.

Sensing what would happen through Kenbunshoku, Luffy was already dodging and literally danced through the air through the palm-sized condensed pressure attacks, causing Kuma to frown ever so slightly. Luffy then returned the favor, his hands disappearing, as he thrust forward, creating his own air pressure attacks like Rankyaku, only thinner and far 'sharper,' which Kuma blocked and then followed up with more of his railgun rounds.

However, he had kept his distance for a reason, and the next time the shadow struck, Luffy was waiting for it. *Just because I can't sense ya doesn't mean I can't predict ya!* The instant he felt it grab onto him from behind, Luffy thrust both hands up above his head and into the shadow, but they were not covered with Busoshoku. Instead, too large energy attacks raced into the shadows as he shouted, "Moko Takabisha!"

The light and energy of the attack disintegrated the shadow from the waist up, and it seemed to collapse, falling back into itself and into a nearby tiny slice of shadow among the

rubble. There it started to seemingly draw the shadow into itself, reforming although far slower than it would have from a Busoshoku hit.

That was all Luffy could see as he was forced to roll forward, dodging a kick from Hancock. He then leaped into the air and away from another Mero Mero beam.

Boa's next attack Luffy couldn't dodge, and it slammed into his shoulder, twisting him around as the malformed nail that she had used fell away. "And you're not the only one who can do that attack," Hancock drawled, standing upright from her stance as Luffy hit the ground, rolling upright without any apparent injury.

"Okay fine, but how are you..." Luffy muttered as the two of them continued to exchange mid-range attacks, looking for an opening.

Boa scoffed, sending more attacks his way many of which nearly got through his defenses despite his best efforts. "Again, you are not the only one here with Kenbunshoku either, Straw Hat. And one person's Kenbunshoku can suppress another's depending on the skill of the individual."

Grimacing at that and not seeing any sign of the shadow reforming, Luffy charged again, heading towards Hancock. "We'll see about that!"

Boa lifted herself off the ground to meet him, only to watch as Luffy skidded to one side by literally pushing off the air with one hand like it was a wall, flipping himself the other way, and getting in under Kuma's guard again.

Kuma had a moment to reflect that perhaps he needed to work on his martial arts style before a kick crashed into his gut, powered not only by Luffy's pure muscles but also Busoshoku. He finally released the sound of pain, grunting as the blow crashed in, hurling him into the ground.

But when Luffy went to follow up, several tons of rubble suddenly launched itself towards Luffy, Kuma's arms having tapped each in turn twice in succession so fast that Luffy had barely seen them move. He blocked and dodged most of it, and the giant shrapnel got in the way of Hancock's attempt to take him from behind. It even disrupted the shadow attack on him, smashing through the shadow, although doing no damage. The next second, Kuma's palm slapped into Luffy's chest, and Kuma smiled faintly. "Pad Ho."

Luffy bellowed in pain as the attack slammed into his chest, and suddenly he was airborne and not under his own power, flying away over the giant ship.

Staring where Luffy had previously been standing, Boa sighed, shaking her head. "You realize if you sent Straw Hat too far away, we will lose, correct? It's the captain we want, not his crew." *Although I am honesty debating whether or not that would be a good thing. Straw Hat*

certainly doesn't fight like a rookie, even in comparison to what I expected. I've had easier fights against New World veterans.

"I know what I am doing," Kuma said, a faint note of annoyance entering his voice for the first time since Hancock had met him. Then he was gone, using his own power to fly towards where he had sent Luffy, leaving Hancock alone for a moment, which she used to try to sense where her crew was. She could feel them fighting out in the 'inlet' area leading to the island section of the gigantic ship and breathed a sigh of relief at sensing all of them still alive, even though several were unconscious.

Luffy tried to fight out of whatever was holding him, but it was as if he was in a rubber ball. The rubber kept shifting with his limbs, limiting his movement, and when he pressed against it, the rubber shifted with his push, but didn't break. *I suppose I could break out of it with my lightning powers, maybe, but even that's not guaranteed, and if I'm going to oust my power like that, I want it to be a damn guarantee!*

Then he was crashing into something, Luffy couldn't see what at first, only becoming aware that it was a giant mast of some kind on the outskirts of thriller bark as he pushed himself out of the indent his flight had created. Even as he saw that, Luffy had to groan in pain. "Damn, that hurt."

"Good."

Twisting around, he was shocked to see Kuma. *Fuck, I stopped using my Kenbunshoku! I need to get better at using it constantly without concentrating on it!* Before Luffy could even think of dodging, Kuma's fist slammed into his back as he once more intoned "Ursus Blast."

A second later, Luffy landed right where he had started and nearly ate a Mero Mero beam from Hancock for his troubles. The beam nearly struck Luffy, but he was able to jerk out of it, only his leg being caught and not turning into stone, surprisingly. "Huh, so you need to catch an entire person, or what?"

Hancock tsked. *Well, that is indeed the case with my Mero Mero Mellow attack, but I think I should start to... GAH!* Boa interrupted her thoughts as she had to defend herself as Luffy's punch caught her in the chest, the momentum hurling backward.

Kuma arrived a second later and looked surprised to see Hancock on the defensive. Then he was busy dodging nails sent his way, smacking them out of the air with one pad-adorned palm. "You are surprisingly durable," he mused.

"I could say the same for you, although I doubt it's for the same reason," Luffy growled. He dodged under a kick from Hancock, grabbed her leg, and kicked the other one out from under her, watching as she flipped in his grip, to fire a beam at his face, forcing him to let go, but unable to dodge a blow to her own face, which sent her reeling. Then Kuma was on him,

and Luffy dodged again through the attacks of the other man, getting in once more under his guard. Several hard blows with Busoshoku enhanced fists flashed in, causing Kuma to grunt but doing no damage that Luffy could sense.

A beam from Hancock made Luffy push away quickly, and the beam hit Kuma dead center, but did nothing. Hancock stared, surprised both by Luffy's ability to dodge when she was using her Kenbunshoku to suppress his and that her power had no effect on Kuma. "That is disturbing."

Once more, the three of them had found themselves standing in a triangle, and Luffy sighed, pulling in his Haoshoku once more. It wasn't having any effect on either of these two anyway. A second later, Hancock did the same with hers, the reverse also having been true beyond the first few seconds' surprise.

"You're going to have to do better than that if you want this pretty little head of mine," Luffy quipped, going so far as to bat his eyes at the two Shichibukai, his earlier seriousness having been pared away during the conflict to reveal his normal attitude. Luffy never was one to be serious for long, and he had moved the battle well away from where he had hidden Robin's body, his main reason for having started the battle in such a serious fashion. Luffy had that much trust in the rest of his crew to survive everything the rest of this haunted house could throw at them. *Besides, this is the best fight I've had since Enel!*

For some reason, Hancock found herself laughing at Straw Hat's overacting before once again charging forward as Kuma did the same.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, Moria had been watching this battle through his shadow as he walked up the stairs to the top of the giant spire. Or rather, what was now the top of the giant spire. The very top and most of the actual mast needed to move Thriller Bark had been blown away due to that attack from the Straw Hats' ship.

That had been annoying but watching the battle from his shadow's perspective was even more worrisome. Straw Hat's ability to dodge, to weave his way through attacks, was amazing. He was fighting two Shichibukai on an even footing, and, if Gecko was reading his body language right, he looked almost as if he was enjoying it!

That was crazy, as Gecko knew that if it was him facing off against Kuma and Hancock both, he would be in deep shit. Even with his powers, Moria wouldn't have been able to face both of them at once. He wasn't nearly fast enough to dodge or use his shadow so effectively to block or dissipate the attacks they were launching at him. To say nothing about the Mero Mero powers that would have had Gecko ensnared quickly, despite his best efforts to control his reaction to the woman.

Straw Hat could have easily become another Shichibukai to replace Crocodile after killing him. Sad that he never showed interest in that. Still, he is young and probably doesn't have much endurance to sustain this high level of combat for long. My fellow Shichibukai will overcome him quickly.

With that, he gave mental orders to his shadow, which was reforming slowly from another weird energy blast. Much like the previous green explosion, Straw Hat's blue attack had somehow disrupted the shadow's ability to just reform although this time, enough of the shadow had survived that it didn't have to reform from Moria himself, instead doing so in the nearby shadows. Despite that slight advantage, Moria had to wonder what that strange energy was, and why it was able to affect his shadow so much. *Perhaps there is more to the World Government's fear than they were willing to tell us? It wouldn't surprise me.*

However, Moria's shadow would be more circumspect now and would wait for a chance to truly make an impact and he sent mental commands to that effect. *After all, I don't care what Boa and Kuma think about my not taking direct action. And I have other things to do.*

"Master, we're here," one of the Risky Brothers intoned, gently touching his Master's foot.

With that, Gecko came back to himself, blinking a bit, as Luffy had just launched another weird attack at his shadow the instant it had reformed, having done so just as Luffy had turned in that direction to block a blow from Hancock. *Ouch, rather bad timing that, my shadow will have to stick to Brick Bat for a bit.*

Then Gecko looked around and smiled, throwing his arms out wide. "Excellent. Open the gate!"

The Risky Brothers looked around, gulping at the sight of the giant wheel with chains as large as they were leading up into the darkness above. But Tararan quickly obeyed, moving towards the wheel and using several of his arms to start it moving with some difficulty.

As he watched the leader of his capture team struggle, muttering 'monkey, monkey' under his breath and ruining the moment, Moria sighed, shaking his head. Honestly, no one had a grasp of the dramatic these days. *Then again, I don't actually have much of an audience at present for the great unveiling. Pity.*

Normally Moria would have his commanders with him on such a momentous moment. But one of them, Absalom, was currently unconscious after having taken the beating of a lifetime, Hogback was buried under the rubble of the fake mansion, almost certainly dead, and Perona was using her powers elsewhere, ordering her to watch the battle between the Shichibukai and Luffy, as well as keep track of the other Straw Hats and the fight on the ship.

The thought of that ship made Moria frown, shaking his head as he remembered the blast of energy that had blasted through the top of his mast like the world's largest air attack. Still, as Fridge 1 opened, he was relieved to see that the giant within wasn't damaged in any way. "Excellent."

He heard gasps and turned to see that Hildon had returned and stood next to the other three zombies present for the grand occasion. *A smaller audience than I wanted but I suppose it will have to do.* "Behold! The largest, most powerful zombie ever devised! The great magnificent Oz!"

"He's, he's even larger than giants are supposed to be!" Hildon stammered.

"Ah, a, a real devil of a beast," Tararan added, all of his eyes wide in shock.

"Indeed. Oz is a giant among giants, more than three times the size of a normal giant. Powerful, destructive, durable to the point even Busoshoku is but a gnat to him! This monster sowed a trail of destruction so wide that it is still told of in whispers today in the New World! Yet all things die, as it did, and now, now I have a shadow that is at least worthy of a placeholder within this great beast," Moria declared, staring almost lovingly up at the monster. "Bring the Pirate Hunter forward."

At that, Tararan carried the Straw Hat's first mate forward. Gecko was amused to notice that the effect of Perona's Negative Hollow had ended. The man was now struggling, trying to get at least one hand free of the spider silk cocoon and even cursing up a storm, the mumble getting louder and louder as his efforts failed.

Despite his best efforts, though, Gecko hefted him up into the air with one hand, while in his other hand, a large pair of scissors appeared. "Welcome, the shadow of Zoro, the so-called pirate hunter!"

With that, Moria used the scissors to cut the shadow near where it intersected Zoro's legs, pulling it away easily. As its original owner slumped in reaction to the sudden loss, the shadow began to struggle, lashing out with a punch and a kick, then trying to reach towards where the shadows of Zoro's swords lay across the stone floor. Each of his blades was being held by one of the Risky Brothers. They and Tararan had taken the precaution of removing them from the man's hands, while he was under the influence of Perona's Negative Hollow during the trip to the keep.

Gecko laughed, shaking the shadow from side to side. "Yes, yes! Struggle, strive, show your strength. But you are a shadow and that means I control you! All shadows obey their Master!"

To his astonishment, Gecko had to repeat this a few times before it finally took, and the shadow subsided, nodding his head and stopping its frantic attempt to get loose. "Good. This

will be your new home," Gecko intoned, gesturing to the zombie. "You will inhabit it and will join my Zombie Army."

The shadow nodded, and Gecko thrust his hand forward, pushing the shadow into its new home. As the head of the shadow slipped into the zombie a moment later, Gecko turned, looking over at Tararan. "Well done, Tararan. Well done indeed!"

"Thank you, Master, but can I ask, how long is that going to take?" It was common knowledge among the zombies that it took a few moments for a shadow to feel at home in its new undead form. The bigger the difference between the shadow and the body it inhabited, the longer it took for the shadow to assume control.

Gecko paused and then stared up at the giant in front of him. "That is actually a very good question. I have no idea, Kishishishishi!"

Tararan sweatdropped a bit at that, and then there was another booming crash from outside, the fight between Luffy and the other two Shichibukai once more picking up.

"Kishishishishi!" Gecko chuckled his signature laugh once more as he leaned against one nearby wall, gesturing Tararan away. "I'm going to take a nap and wait for this one to start moving. Tararan spread out your remaining spiders. Find those women from the Straw Hats and capture them if possible. Risky Brothers, relay a message to Perona. I'll want her hollows to concentrate on the Straw Hats ship. When the fight there comes to an end, well... she knows what to do."

With that, Gecko Moria leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. He wasn't actually taking a nap. Rather, Moria concentrated once more on the connection to his shadow as it fought Luffy with Hancock and Kuma's support. In this manner, he could concentrate on the main prize and be ready to act once events elsewhere started to wind down, and he was brought more shadows to add to the remaining extra zombies they had in storage.

"And I need to make up my numbers anyway," Moria grumbled as he felt several hundred shadows roiling within his body. The Straw Hats hadn't purified all of the zombies they defeated. Instead, many of the zombies had simply been damaged to such a degree that their bodies, despite being undead, had collapsed. It was astonishing to think that the Straw Hats had done so while essentially coasting but it was true nonetheless.

Still, the extra shadows within him could be turned into added strength for both his physical body and his own shadow, and Luffy would learn this to his cost now. *And when I take the shadows of the Kujas and the rest of the Straw Hats, I'll be able to remake my General Zombie corps, although not the regular, monster or even the Surprise Zombies lost in the mansion and forest. Still, that is for later and there are those shadows I can sense out there...*

"Hildon," he barked without opening his eyes, knowing the wine-drinking bat-creature had stayed. "Observe the battle on the ship. Watch how they deal with Perona's hollows, and make certain that the Kujas are weakened enough before she sends her Hollows in. This Straw Hat crew has proven to be full of surprises, not just their captain. And I don't want any more issues from that area."

Hildon instantly bowed and then flapped off as Gecko settled in to wait.

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As Moria leaned back and began his 'nap,' the battle between Luffy and Moria's fellow Shichibukai was about to change.

This second phase of the fight was harder for Luffy because while he was adapting his attacks to his two (and a half) enemies, Boa's attacks had gotten far harder to dodge now that she knew Kuma was immune to her Mero Mero Mellow attack. Luffy had dodged her attacks several times by the literal skin of his chin. But by this point, the rule had been proven: for that attack to freeze a person, she had to catch his head or heart within the radius of the beam.

Worse for Boa was something else going on as the fight continued. Growling, Hancock lashed out with a kick, catching Luffy in the side, but the area she hit was glowing black for a moment, but a series of punches and kicks forced Luffy onto the defensive even though none of her blows landed. "How are you doing that?" she growled, as she pressed her momentary advantage. "You're throwing off my Kenbunshoku now."

"Heh, well, you did give me the clue Boa-chan," Luffy taunted. "You were the one who told me my Kenbunshoku could interfere with yours. I'm just returnin' the favor." Hancock snarled at that more than a little annoyed at Straw Hat's learning curve, and the two of them exchanged several more blows, with Luffy successfully redirecting the Mero Mero beams as Boa let them loose at point-blank range. "Now it is just which one of us can move fast enough to take advantage of the future-changes."

I wanted to hold back most of my attacks to spring them on Moria if I had to, but with Straw Hat's skill I don't have that option, Boa mused, then gathered her power into her leg as she lashed out with a kick towards Luffy. "Perfume Femur!"

Seeing himself being turned into stone if he tried to block the attack, Luffy dodged, but the tree behind his previous position didn't, and while in the air, Luffy saw the strike turn it into stone. "What the hell!?" *So much for her powers being like that one trick pony Foxy-fuck!*

Boa didn't let it stop her attack, launching yet another new type of attack towards Luffy. "Pistol Kiss!" Her hands formed into pistols, and from her index finger shot out tiny heart-shaped bullets which lashed out towards Luffy far faster than her earlier attacks. When one of them smashed into a piece of flying debris from where Luffy had kicked a tree towards Boa,

Luffy saw the 'bullets' were covered somehow by her Busoshoku in a less 'firm' manner as the large branch was blasted to pieces by just one of the Pistol Kiss attacks.

Okay, that looks way too much like she's able to add weight to an attack like Gramps does with his Fists of Love. Diluted Haki...I need to make a note of that for later.

Now in the air, Luffy could dodge through the rest of Boa's Pistol Kiss attacks, but Kuma wasn't idle during this assault, and a second later, a Pad Ho crashed into Luffy's side. Although Luffy had covered his entire body with Busoshoku by this point, the attack blasted him sideways, where he was nearly caught by Boa, who leaped up and lashed out with a kick that nearly took Luffy in the face. Dodging that, Luffy was caught by a Brick Bat attack, which, while unable to harm him, halted any momentum he could have used to gain some distance, letting Kuma bombard him.

As he dodged through these attacks thanks to his growing ability to use Kenbunshoku in a fight, Luffy had a brief second to note that Kuma relied entirely on his palm strikes. Luffy had seen seven or eight different attacks thanks to his Nikyu Nikyu Devil Fruit, but they all had to come from the same two places. Combined with his Kenbunshoku, that let Luffy predict what attack was coming. He couldn't always dodge, but he dodged enough to let his body tank the rest.

Oddly, the shadow was the most annoying of his three opponents. Its hit and run tactics worked far too well in throwing Luffy off his stride, and even when he destroyed it with a Moko Takabisha, the thing came back relatively quickly. Still, the shadow alone couldn't do any real damage to Luffy regardless of if he was using Haki and the ghosts hadn't been seen since Gecko had ordered Perona to not attack Luffy.

For their part, both Hancock and Kuma took hits from Luffy in return. Kuma's upper chest should have been a mass of bruises under his shirt, but that shirt had so far survived everything that had gotten through the man's defenses. His face had one heck of a shiner, but beyond that, Kuma was so durable that Luffy couldn't tell if his blows were hurting the bastard at all yet.

Hancock had also taken a few hard knocks but **far** fewer. And while she didn't seem to be battered, she had at least looked a little woozy or slower for a few seconds after Luffy's blows had landed. But in return, she was now using her Busoshoku on the defense when needed.

"Perfume Femur Magna!" Boa shouted as she attacked from on high. Luffy had lost the height advantage for once, and now Boa moved to take advantage of it. Yet despite having more experience with Kenbunshoku, she could not suppress Luffy's, perhaps because of his own skill in Haki generally or because of his logia power giving him a natural advantage.

Whichever the case, Luffy sensed the attack coming, and was able to dodge it at the last instant, though he couldn't take advantage of Boa's body flashing past his thanks to ongoing Pad Hos from Kuma.

When Boa's axe kick connected to the top of the tree directly below Luffy's former position, the entire tree, not just the area directly around her strike, turned to stone. Some surrounding trees that touched the initial tree were also turned into stone.

"Okay... that's more than a little frighteningGGG!" Luffy's voice rose into a shout as Boa had gone through the stone foliage and now shattered the tree, sending the shattered remnants upwards as if it had become so much shrapnel. Many of the bits hit Luffy, and he was bounced between them and one of Kuma's attacks, although the Pad Ho also destroyed several of the bits of shrapnel.

Landing in a previously cleared area, Luffy rolled as he landed, and when Boa flung herself forward with a kick, He was able to block it. The two Busoshoku clad limbs crashed together so hard that it created a sonic boom, and Hancock's eyes widened seeing Luffy still covered in the armor-type Haki. This opened her up to an uppercut that sent her flying backward amidst another sonic boom, sending her through two trees before she got her feet under her.

But at the same time, Kuma bounced over until he was just above Luffy, and then he lashed out downwards, his hands creating a series of crescent-shaped air attacks through the air. They almost looked like Rankyaku attacks, but when they hit, they exploded, showing each was a condensed air attack rather than an air pressure attack. " Kuma no Te."

Luffy was forced to dodge through them while Boa snarled, tossing the shattered remnants of the trees she'd smashed through off her, grumbling in annoyance as she noticed her dress had taken some damage just then. After a brief inspection, she ignored this and breathed in deeply before tapping her lips with two fingers. Boa then pushed them forward lightly before pulling that same hand back over her shoulder, the heart outline growing as she did. As Boa thrust her hand forward, there was a pop like a bubble bursting, and hundreds of arrows like her Pistol Kiss attack appeared where the heart outline had been, zooming forward in the direction her hand thrust out. "Slave Arrow!"

In this case, this was toward Luffy and directly above his position. But this actually helped Luffy in that he sensed it coming, and Kuma did not halt his own Kuma no Te attack. The heart-tipped arrows crashed into the condensed air attacks, bursting them, while others froze bits and pieces of the flotsam Kuma's attacks had thrown up, while also turning segments of the still-falling foliage between Luffy and Kuma into stone.

Realizing this, Kuma moved to the other side of Luffy, keeping up his assault.

But then Luffy sensed a familiar mind coming closer to the battlefield. He grinned suddenly and then dashed forward, changing his style on the fly. Boa froze, surprise visible on her features as instead of closing through the air as she and Kuma had been anticipating, Luffy had turned and closed with Kuma through the use of Soru and Geppo bouncing along the ground, not the air. While this opened him up for more attacks from both Kuma in the air and Boa from behind, a series of Rankyaku lashed out towards Kuma as well as into the previously frozen ground kicking up debris and exploding the previous frozen air pressure attacks in Boa's face as she had charged to one side to get around them.

So quickly had Luffy changed tactics that it threw off Boa's Kenbunshoku and Kuma's attacks both. Then he was in and under Kuma's guard once again, but instead of outright attacking, Luffy thrust forward with both hands. When his hands impacted Kuma's chest, Luffy blasted out the equivalent of a Geppo, hurling Kuma up and away from the battlefield. "He's all yours, Sanji!"

As he spoke, Sanji arrived on the battlefield, having used a mix of Geppo and Soru as Luffy had a moment ago, only Sanji had come down from out of the air, well above the battle. Now he lashed out at Kuma with a series of assaults that looked like they were coming from a dozen angles at once with each attack, the cook used his other leg to bounce elsewhere through the air. This assault pushed Kuma further away from Hancock and the shadow that had just grabbed Luffy again, halting his advance towards her.

As he did, Sanji's voice reached Luffy, a yell of pure joy, a sign that Sanji knew exactly how little he would have been worth if he stayed in the same general area as "Luffy, I could kiss you!" Sanji shouted, even as he pressed in hard on Kuma. "All right, you shitty bear-pawed bastard! Let's dance!"

But doing this had pushed Luffy into the shadow cast from an outcropping of rock. Dozens of shadowy fists hammered into Luffy out of that greater shadow, crashing into him far harder than the previous Brick Bat attack. A second later, a giant hand attempted to grab at Luffy, but Luffy diffused the shadow once more with a Moko Takabisha.

Yet it held him just long enough for a hasty Slave Arrow attack to bracket Luffy's position. "Slave Arrow!" Although not holding as many arrows, they were more targeted, and Luffy was not currently using Busoshoku to defend his entire body.

"Crap!" Luffy bellowed, but he could defend himself, sweeping his arms and one leg through the arrows. They were all turned into stone, but a second later, Luffy grinned. There was a flash of yellow energy, and the stone around Luffy's limbs shattered, leaving him to leap out of the shadows.

"How did you do that?!" Hancock barked, stumbling to a halt as she stared, her eyes widening in shock. "When struck by a Slave Arrow you cannot simply banish the stone like that! Even being asexual would not allow that!"

"Don't look now, but your pride's showing," Luffy said, smirking slightly. "As for how I did that, that's for me to know and you to never find out!"

Taking this as a personal affront, Hancock snarled and attacked once more. She launched another, far more numerous Slave Arrow, charging forward on its heels.

"Aw, don't be like that, Hanny," Luffy taunted, grimacing internally as while he was able to dodge through the arrows, a roundhouse kick crashed into his defenses, causing him to grimace although he hadn't sensed any Mero Mero type power in the kick. *Damn, this girl is **strong**! On her own she's about the third worst opponent I've ever faced, this life or my last! Worse, using Busoshoku as long as I had to against Boa and Kuma's attacks has started to get to me.* "You're gonna get wrinkles."

"How dare you!" Hancock shouted, her entire manner changing at the, in Luffy's opinion, lame taunt. She charged forwards, now throwing off his ability to read her attacks entirely with Kenbunshoku. Boa's fists and legs flashed as Boa tried to keep Luffy on the ground. This failed, but she could still land a kick to his side, which caused Luffy to double over as his Busoshoku failed for a moment. The next blow made his head ring, but he returned one, which doubled her over but she then blasted with a Mero Mero attack aimed at his chest.

Luffy dodged that and then saw Busoshoku clad foot flashing towards his head forcing Luffy to use Busoshoku to take the blow as it crashed into his forehead despite his attempt to dodge below it. For a moment, Haki strained against Haki as Hancock snarled, "I'm only twenty-nine! How dare you insinuate that I already have wrinkles!"

"Eesh, I said gonna, princess, is someone a bit defensive?" Luffy grunted under the strain from the kick to his forehead, trying desperately not to look at the free show on offering. *Huh, purple pant, no, Bad Luffy!* He thought as both the woman's glare and the pressure of her foot increased on his forehead, the Busoshoku clad heel almost digging into his forehead despite his own Haki defense. "GAaa, okay, okay, so maybe I was a little over the line. That means you're only a year older than Robin, no wrinkles there, right!?" *Freaking female fury, it haunts me wherever I go!*

Hancock nodded, kicked off of his forehead, flipping herself through the air, her anger dissipating to be replaced by just a tad bit of smugness, as well as an equally tiny bit of approval. "Apology accepted, I suppose, despite how you gave it. I also note that you have kept us all away from where her statue lies. Well done. But a simply apology doesn't mean I will stop trying to kill you."

Luffy shrugged with a wry smile on his face. "And it doesn't mean I will let you. Although, respect for fighting in heels. Ouch."

He then ducked a slash from the remade shadow, grunting as it shifted into a Brick Bat mid-attack, biting and clawing at Luffy but doing no real harm. However, it did slow him down

enough for Hancock to start to attack once more and then launched one of her beams nearly at point-blank range, the battle picking up once more.

OOOOOOO

Sanji danced around the bear-themed Shichibukai, lashing out with kick after kick but mostly switching to a new attack before his last went anywhere. Kuma's defense was simple enough to understand; he simply interposed his palms between any incoming assault. Normally that wouldn't exactly terrify Sanji, but Sanji had seen what those paw-pads could do and didn't want to see what could happen when they smacked into his legs.

I have to get past them entirely. You can't just overwhelm a Devil Fruit. And I don't have Luffy's ability to change my kicks aim on a millisecond, damn it. However, despite that lack, Sanji was able to keep up the pressure and was mobile enough in the air to back Kuma away from where his captain was fighting the great beauty of the oceans, Boa Hancock.

Ah, I really, really want to go back there, but for all the wrong reasons! I mean, how dare my shitty captain fight her, but no! She's an enemy. I can't think of Hancock-sama's long black hair, her heart-shaped face and powerful stare like that of a regal queen, her legs so long, all the better to step on.... no Sanji, stop it! Don't let your...

"Pad Thrust," Kuma intoned, and Sanji realized with a start that he had been speaking out loud.

Shaking his head and banishing the heart shape his one visible eye had become, Sanji barely dodged the palm strike aimed at his chest. Instead, it glanced off his shoulder with enough force to twirl him around midair. It also hurt like blazes, but thankfully, a few fingers and the side of Kuma's paw wasn't enough to activate whatever kind of Devil fruit power the other man used.

Instead, Sanji went with the momentum of the blow, twirling like a top and launching an attack that got through this time thanks to the added speed. His leg became covered in Busoshoku, crashing into the Shichibukai's side. It didn't double the monster over as Sanji had hoped, but it at least hurled Kuma sideways and left him seemingly open, his arms flailing.

Sanji instantly went on the assault, bouncing through the air as fast as he could, then coming down with a two-legged stomp towards Kuma's back, faster than Kuma could turn, hammering into him and sending him still further away from where Luffy was. Kuma crashed into the top of the former castle wall that acted as a cliff face around the 'island' in the center of Thriller Bark. This side was at a ninety-degree angle from where the *Everlasting Resolve* had initially laid anchor and wasn't marked by the shattered stone and ground which had led the crew up to the forest.

But even as he crashed into the stone wall, both of Shichibukai's palms were thrusting out behind him, and he intoned, "Pad Bomb."

Bolts of air suddenly appeared as he gently moved his fingers, gathering air into the pads on his palms, shooting it back towards where Sanji was still in the air above him, forcing the pirate to dodge. They exploded in midair, not being created to sustain themselves until impact, rather simply created to explode quickly, and Sanji grimaced as he was bounced between a few of them. *Damn it, I am so glad I've gone through Luffy's training. Not that I'll ever thank him for it.*

Kuma slammed down into the stone, rolling instantly to his feet, unharmed. It didn't look like he had even been bothered by the impact to the stone, despite the impact having created several noticeable cracks in the stone. Staring over to where Sanji had just touched down, the Shichibukai thrust both paws forward. A wide-angle Pad Bomb attack attempted to bracket Sanji, keeping him on the ground even as he dodged almost entirely around the Tyrant's former position. A small stumble halted Sanji in place for just a second, and Kuma instantly took advantage, shifting the manner of attack one of his hands was launching. "Pad Ho."

A series of air pressure attacks sent toward Sanji in a long line flashed forward, crashing into Sanji before he could dodge. The Straw Hats' cook gasped in agony as he was flung backward over the edge of the island portion of Thriller Bark. Unable to control his descent, Sanji rolled end over end, through the air before bouncing along the water several times until he crashed into the outer wall of the odd ship.

When he smacked into the outer wooden wall of the ship portion of Thriller bark, he looked up, noticing idly a large crater well above where he had hit in the side of a truly huge mast. *Huh, so this whole place really is a ship. Man... the world is truly vast, huh.*

Only mildly bruised once more thanks to his toughness training under his mad captain, Sanji got his legs underneath him, propelling himself back towards where the Shichibukai had just started to bounce higher into the air in preparation to turning away from him, wishing to head back to the battle. Already from where Kuma was in the air, he could see Hancock and Straw Hat going to war on one another and doing a great deal more damage to the surrounding forest than each other.

But he wasn't going to get away that easily.

"Fast Food Service!" Sanji's shouted, and his legs blurred. In a mixture of Geppo and Soru, he crossed the intervening distance, his legs disappearing even to someone at the Shichibukai's level. If it had been anyone else on the crew, this move would have put tremendous strain on their legs. Even Luffy would've been hesitant to use it. But Sanji was a leg-fighter first, and all the muscles in his hips and below were incredibly powerful, despite his lean frame.

He crossed the intervening distance before the Shichibukai could go more than a few hops back toward the fight and crashed into him with a sonic boom. The impact blasted aside the ever-present fog, the sound crashing out across the island, noticed by all but Hancock and Luffy, too busy creating their own thunderous retorts as they were.

For the first time, a sound also erupted from the Shichibukai's throat, a grunt of pain as he was launched upwards and away through the air. Following up quickly, Sanji bounced until he was above Kuma before lashing down with another kick, which the Shichibukai barely dodged, forcing Sanji to pull his leg back before twirling around another upthrust paw.

High above the massive floating island Thriller Bark, the Shichibukai stared upwards at Sanji, who was bouncing through the air above him, spitting out his cigarette, which had gone out as he bounced along the water, although scant little of it had been left by that point anyway. "You paw-bastard, if you think you can just knock me aside as if I'm no freaking threat, you have another thing coming."

Shichibukai narrowed his deep-set, pale eyes. "You are quite persistent, it is true. But we are only here for your captain. Let us take him, and perhaps the rest of you will be free to go. He is the only one of you seen as a threat by the World Government."

That was a lie, but Kuma had his own plans going forward. Wiping out the Straw Hats would not serve those plans in any way, so if he could, Kuma wanted at least a few of them to live beyond this day's events.

Sanji was furious, snarling in anger, his hands clenching as he suddenly fought the desire to find some of his kitchen knives and fillet this fool. "Do you think I'm just going to let you keep ganging up on him! What kind of crew do you think we are?"

Sanji would be the first to admit that his crew wasn't perfect. First, it wasn't all comprised of Sanji and the ladies, forcing him to put up with the emergency food ingredient, the clueless Marimo, the fashion don't, and, worse, Luffy and his, his romance with Robin-cwhan. Even thinking about that now physically hurt Sanji, causing a tear to fall from his eye. And of course, Luffy was far too martial arts training mad, which cut into Sanji's time with the ladies and cooking. His two main loves.

And yet, Sanji had to acknowledge that he would not be as strong as he was without that training. He was honest enough to admit it was because of Luffy's training that he could be up here at all, facing down a Shichibukai. His captain had promised to make him stronger and had promised to help him achieve his dream. And, as much as Sanji wouldn't want to admit it to anyone, he considered Luffy one of his best friends too. "No, you giant piece of bear meat, you're not going to get away from me before I tenderize you into the ground!"

"Annoying," the calm voice of the Shichibukai intoned before shrugging. "Then... if you had a wish, where would you like to go?"

Sanji scowled but made no verbal reply and Kuma launched himself forward, crashing into and upwards towards Sanji.

The cook dodged the attack, lashing out with a kick, changing the angle of his attack by pushing off the ground with his other foot just slightly via Geppo. Kuma hadn't anticipated that change, and though he saw it coming, the kick still caught him on the side of his chest, smacking him slightly sideways in the air. Off the ground, his bulk was less useful against the momentum of such hits, even if they didn't hurt him.

A massive air attack appeared around Kuma's twirling hand and he thrust it down but then paused, the air dissipating as Sanji rolled away through the air. He used both hands and feet to create the Geppo technique, bouncing up and to the side, a grim smile on his face as he used his greater agility against the warlord. Despite the Warlord's Devil Fruit-assisted speed, it was obvious that Sanji had the advantage in the air. *My need to occasionally back up my limited Geppo with one of my paws is slowing me down more than I anticipated here. He also seems to have some limited ability to read my attacks. I wonder, is that a sign that he is on the cusp of discovering Kenbunshoku, or just his own adaptability and reaction time?*

"Regardless, it is most annoying," Kuma grumbled as Sanji came back into an attack.

OOOOOOO

Arrows flashed down towards the deck of the *Everlasting Resolve* from the Kujas able to use Geppo, their bows oddly made of snakes, which somehow were able to keep their bodies rigid enough to be used this way. There weren't many, only about a third of the reinforced crew but that was enough. Each arrow seemed imbued with some kind of energy, letting the hail of arrows crash down like so many cannonballs. But the Adam Wood was proof against this assault, the arrows bouncing away despite the energy, with only the windows and the doors smashed inwards or off their hinges.

Below, Laki and Franky dealt with the attack in their own, individual ways. Laki leaped sideways, then began to use her Air Dial skates, racing out into the air to one side of the ship. Several of the attackers in the air turned in her direction, trying to bracket her as they shouted, "What the heck, how is she doing that?"

"It's got to be something to do with those boots of hers, look, they are releasing little blasts of air!" one of the other Kujas, a tall woman with a very big head in relation to her body and green hair shouted. "Six of you keep her away. The rest of you concentrate fire on the blue-haired man!"

"The name is Franky, babes!" With that, Franky held up his hands, shouting out, "Franky Shield!" The cyborg's forearms, already much larger than they should be given the rest of his arms, grew even further, becoming twin shields, which he clapped together in front of his face. The rest of his body was hit by several arrows, and he grunted under the impact but didn't take

much damage. "Hell yeah, I am full of cola, babes. You're not going to overcome this suuuper Franky!"

But Sandersonia and her group had a reason for launching such an attack, and below them, the Kuja Pirates unable to use Geppo over the intervening distance rowed rapidly towards the *Everlasting Resolve*. Eve noticed this and shouted out even as the guns began to fire, "I can't get at them. They got in under my range too quick."

A few of the Kuja pirates tried to leap up into the air from closer, apparently because they were now close enough to get the rest of the way through the air. But Eve fired at them, knocking several out of the air, causing her next words to come out in a smug tone. "Well, except for those stupid enough to leap back into my firing arc. Idiots."

"Nice going, Eve, keep it up!" Laki answered, firing back with her rifle as she landed back on the deck for a moment, reloading as she fired the last round in her magazine. One of the Kujas in the air above them crumpled, but the others kept on firing, dodging her renewed fire.

A moment later, Marigold leaped up from the rowboats, leading the assault onto the ship as she smashed into Franky, causing him to stumble backward. However, as he lifted it over the guard railing, she found her head being grabbed by the massive hand of the man and then lifted off her feet as a weapon against two of her sisters who were smashed back into the water. "Franky Flail!"

While this didn't injure Marigold much, the others behind her were forced to jump back down to their ships. But elsewhere, more Kuja pirates leaped for the taller ship's deck but were taken under fire by Franky's other hand. "Fresh Gatling!" Musket balls shot out at the Kuja from his knuckles, sending several of them falling back into the ocean.

The slower than average musket balls didn't hurt even the least experienced Kuja. Still, one of the women was knocked entirely out by a lucky shot to the side of her head. Two of her fellow sisters fell back, grabbing her and then dumping her in one of the escape boats before joining the others.

Laki was too busy dodging to help Franky much, but eventually was able to bounce up and into the group of arrow shooters, lashing out with fist and rifle, firing at point-blank range. "You think you know air combat better than a Shandian! You ladies have massive egos to go with that those old-fashioned if weird bows of yours!"

This seemed to incense more than a few of them, and one blonde shouted out, "We'll show you old-fashioned!" as she shot an arrow at point-blank range towards Laki.

The Shandian dodged nimbly, using her skates to bounce around better than even the best Geppo user among them, the green-haired woman with the big head could follow. As Laki moved, she fired back from the hip, hitting the blonde woman in the chest sending her

backward with a cry of pain but no actual blood. "Huh, you ladies are tough!" Laki acknowledged to herself, even as she dodged another blow, before the green-haired woman got too close, forcing her to use one of her Dial weapons. "Eat flame bitch!"

A short-ranged bolt of fire flew out and forced the woman backward, and Laki quickly lashed out to either side with kicks, forcing two other of the Kujas to protect themselves. Using the impact to push off like a sprinter, Laki flipped up and over the first attacker, then bringing her rifle around to block another blow, dodging an arrow again and then a spear thrust followed by a sword aimed toward her head. *And there's a lot of them*, she thought, grinning tightly. *That just means they are more likely to hit one another than me!*

The next moment, she found the green-haired woman thrusting a trident towards where Laki was going to be.

Crap is that Mantra!?" This forced Laki to block instead of dodge, and she cried out at the impact jarred her arms, smashing her out of the air. A second later, she crashed back onto the *Everlasting Resolve*, skidding across the deck until she smacked into one of the gun turrets, her back black and blue and her head ringing.

Franky instantly pushed away from where he had been guarding against the borders, tossing the woman he'd been using as a flail at them, before moving to stand beside Laki, his wrist flipping up to reveal a large gun aperture there as he shouted out, "Franky Bazooka, Scatter Round!"

"Shit! Evade!" Sandersonia shouted, dodging to one side.

He fired up into the air, but instead of aiming at one individual, this cannonball contained a fuse set to a timer, cut very, very short. A second later, it exploded among the Kujas in the air, sending several of them falling. But more than a few of them had been able to escape the area of effect and continued to rain down arrows smashing into Franky with the power of cannonballs. "Shit, that's actually starting to hurt," he grumbled.

By the railing, Marigold growled, shaking her head and standing to one side as her Kuja sisters finally pulled themselves out of the ocean. More than half of them were nursing injuries, but all of them were still game and pulled out swords and spears, charging forward as Marigold slowly recovered from the punishment she had taken being used by that man as an impromptu weapon.

"I am going to crush his skull like a grape for that!" the woman growled to herself. Marigold was almost tempted to change into her Zoan form, Model King Cobra, and start spitting poison at the man, but not with so many of her fellow Kuja pirates around him already. *I'll wait for the crowd to thin first.*

Behind Franky's bulk, Laki pushed herself to her knees. Even with her head still ringing, she fired at one of the warriors on the deck already, taking the leg out from under her in a spray of semi-automatic fire, breaking the woman's knee if the angle of the leg was anything to go by. "Huh, good to know their durability has a limit. I have to aim at the hinges then," she thought to herself with some amusement.

Laki rolled forward, firing upwards at two of the others trying to fire down at the deck, hitting both of them in the upper thigh and shoulder. The one shot in the shoulder grunted in pain, and her arm fell useless to her side. The one with the thigh wound kept on firing, even as she slowly began to drop down to land on the deck to join the hand-to-hand battle.

"Mistress Sandersonia, you should head down and help your sister and the others! We're almost to the point where we can't shoot for fear of hitting our comrades," a raven-haired Kuja woman by the name of Kikyo suggested. "I'll keep Rindo and Blue Fan up here with me."

Sandersonia nodded and wordlessly dropped to the deck near the prow of the Straw Hat's ship.

As she did, several of the attackers who had charged towards the two embattled Straw Hats found themselves tripped on nothing, slowed down in their mad rush to close with the man who had humiliated Lady Marigold and wounded so many of their comrades. Others tumbled into them, slowing the rush down further.

This allowed Franky to smash several of them to the ground with powerful blows, even as he grabbed another woman, a somewhat short, black-haired woman with a serious, grim face, by the throat and used her body to smash others out of his way. "While it isn't super for a man to fight a woman, I'm a little too hardboiled to care about that kind of thing, you know!"

Franky shouted, smashing down, and then, to the astonishment of one of them, whose clothing had been set alight by Laki before, tossing his shirt to her, standing there in only his speedo's now. "Cover yourself up woman, the battlefield is no place for that kind of thing."

The woman gaped, took the offering, and then stared at Franky as the other Kuja pirates continued to charge forward. *What is this, what is this feeling I'm feeling? Admiration? For a male?! Impossible!*

The fire from above struck once more, smashing Franky backward. At the same time, Laki dodged desperately, unable to get back into the air. Every time she tried to, the black-haired woman with her hair in a long ponytail barked orders, and Laki found herself the center of attention from above. And now the woman with the big head and the trident was charging forward, forcing Laki to shift her attention to the trident wielder. Laki somehow knew she was a more dangerous combatant than the other Amazons, and she used her Iron Cloud Dial to

defend herself from above, as she kept the woman dodging, well out of range of her own attack.

Franky was being pushed too hard by the attackers on the ship already to give her cover, and now, he was starting to take hits from behind. He grimaced in pain, unwilling to show any weakness in front of women, again being a little too hardboiled for that kind of thing.

Something had to give, and an arrow smashed down from above a second later. Skirting around the woman's Iron cloud shield as it once more began to deform, the arrow caught Laki in the back, causing her to scream in pain as she fell forward, hammering into her like a massive fist.

Seeing the enemy woman collapse, Sandersonia raced forward, her trident lashing out. "Die!"

Franky twisted around, batting aside the trident just in time to save her, and from the ground, Laki rolled onto her back, thrusting her rifle up as she activated another one of her dial weapons. And unlike the handheld flame dial she had used in the air before, this was a more defined weapon underslung on her rifle like a bayonet. "Burning Bayonet!"

The plasma blade flashed up into the woman's weapon aiming for her hand. Sandersonia was already shifting her hand away, but she was still burnt by the edge of the blade as it sliced her weapon in two. Then Laki was charging forward, and the green-haired woman stumbled back, avoiding the bayonet. Sandersonia tried to bat the strange tongue of fire away with her trident's metal head, but the hell weapon of the other woman cut right through it, and Sandersonia yowled in agony as it cut a gash along one of her arms, cauterizing the wound at the same time. "Damn it, what the hell is that thing!?"

While Sandersonia scrambled back and debated if even her Zoan form's durability would be up to standing against that weapon, while also trying to use her Kenbunshoku.

Behind Laki, Franky took two enhanced arrow shots to the face and side, sending him stumbling, and he raised a hand to his face, wiping away the blood. Then the fat woman was on him, the edge of her sword slashing into his chest. "Grah, you're gonna have to do better than that to get through my hard shell!"

For her part, Marigold was still frustrated. There were still too many of her comrades around, but they all had their blood up by this point. There was no way any order she gave to pull back would be even heard. And she had just tripped over nothing, too! *I never do that! And I've seen a few of the others do the same thing. Something strange is going on here...*

Meanwhile, Kikyo and her team had changed targets back to Laki, forcing her to halt her attack on Sandersonia as dozens of arrows flashed down toward her, forcing Laki to use her

Iron Cloud shield once more. After only a few seconds, the shield dented the dial losing the ability to work well at this altitude

This allowed Sandersonia to launch the remnants of her trident forward, which caught Laki. Once more, using her Kenbunshoku, she knew where the woman was going to be, and even though Laki tried her best, the hardened wooden shaft skewered the side of her chest and sent her crashing backward with a cry of pain.

Sandersonia grinned and then shifted forms, calling on her Devil Fruit powers. "Zoan type, Anaconda!"

Instantly, her body changed, shifting until it was several stories tall, her legs disappearing, merging together into a long, sinuous tail that wound out behind her and over the prow of the ship. Her body was covered in green and light scales. Her hair also grew even longer, while her face shifted into a mix of a woman's face and snakes. Her long tongue, which had previously been sticking out of her mouth, now was even longer and very visibly forked.

And through it all, her clothing, a bikini top, half-cloak and panties, stayed in place somehow.

In her new form, Sandersonia charged forward, intent on ending this fight. But before she could, the battlefield changed once more.

"Lightning Tempo, Wild Parade!" Nami bellowed as she and Makino arrived on the scene. They had covered this distance by Nami's Mirage Tempo, invisible to all thanks to a weather trick she had created using her staff and the fog. The fog had given Nami more than enough cold air to work with as she added more heat to it, while Makino carried her forward. Now the attack she had been preparing struck and lightning crashed into the Kujas from every direction.

The attack was devastating, sending more than two-thirds of the still-fighting Kuja into the water or down to the deck of the *Everlasting Resolve*, causing a shared scream of agony that echoed across the water. "YAAAAHHHHH!" The only survivors beyond Boa's two siblings were three who had entered the ship, heading down to clear out the shooters they thought were below, and two women who had been able to use the railgun's cannons as cover.

Sandersonia was also struck several times, but in her Zoan form, the blasts only caused her to scream in pain. They weren't enough to knock her out as it had several of her fellow Kuja Pirates, and she cried out again and again as the lightning struck her. *D, damn it, my Kenbunshoku is still too unformed, as is my Busoshoku!*

Seeing this, Makino let Nami down onto the deck and snarled, her hands and weapons covered by Busoshoku as she launched towards the serpent woman, wanting to finish her off in her weakening state. "How about at least a little more of a fair fight bitch!" she shouted,

causing Franky and even the heavily wounded Laki to stare as the few remaining Amazons slowly got over their shock.

Nami shrugged at their incredulous expressions, simply saying, "We've had a bit of a bad day today. It was going great for a bit, but damn if it didn't go into the bilges quick."

"Fight now, explain later," Franky growled, as he lashed out with one test towards one Kujas, while keeping the massive woman's sword away from him with the other. She had somehow dodged a large number of the lightning and had been pressing him even harder than before, her movements faster and broader now that she didn't need to worry about hitting her fellow Amazons.

"You have the right of that at least. It is time to end this!" the woman hissed as she too shifted. "Zoan Type, King Cobra!"

As she spoke, Marigold too changed. Her body grew to a bit smaller than the other woman, her scales being light tan throughout. Her teeth were noticeably longer, her tail shorter, and her body broader.

A second later, she spat at Franky, a bright ball of goop that looked so bright green Franky instinctively knew it was bad news. But he didn't have time to dodge, and the contact poison struck his body, causing Franky to gasp in pain. But thanks to his cyborg body, he wasn't overcome even as the fumes from the poison reached his nostrils, and the next second, he shattered the woman's sword with a well-timed punch.

Growling in anger and now just too angry to use her limited Kenbunshoku, Marigold bulled forward into Franky, a blow slamming into his face and a third blow taking him in the chest, hurling him almost off his feet, while her tail wrapped around him, employing a trick Sandersonia routinely used. Franky was able to grab onto her shoulder with his larger hand and then headbutted the woman, sending her upper body stumbling backward despite her Zoan form.

He then tried to bring one of his other weapons into the battle, but Marigold smacked his arms aside and kept on hammering blow after blow into his face and chest, intent on just wearing the big man down. Instead of attempting to get out of this, though, Franky roared back, "Well, if it's a fistfight you want, babe, then fine!" Trying to give as good as he got.

Using her tail somehow to bounce in the air as she had her legs previously, Sandersonia was pressing Makino back hard, using her Kenbunshoku as best she could, while still rattled from the lightning. Meanwhile, her hair became dozens of snakes, lashing out towards Makino, who smacked them aside, and then was firing her guns, grateful that she was using the two pistols she had, which had multiple rounds, her gun from South Blue and the dial pistol that Laki had made for her. "Gun Kenpo, Fusillade!"

Two Busoshoku-clad bullets got through Sandersonia's defenses, and the woman cried out, falling back to the deck. Now it was her turn to be pummeled from above, as Makino kept her distance, firing both of her pistols, dropping them, and grabbing out more uncaring that she had just dropped both of her best pistols into the water, knowing it was more imperative to keep up the pressure. She began to feel the strain of coating so many musket balls with Busoshoku but kept up the barrage.

The woman grunted and winced at every bullet, but thanks to her Zoan form, Makino realized that she wasn't doing enough damage. Indeed, Sandersonia now was using her Busoshoku and the bullets from Makino couldn't get through it. "You're going to have to do better than that," she taunted, lashing out to one side with her tail and catching Nami in the back, as she had been standing fighting against several of the remaining Kuja, trying desperately to protect the wounded Laki.

"Gaaah!" Nami screamed in pain but rolled with the blow, yet this put her in among the surviving Kuja pirates, three of whom had raced back onto the main deck to join their fellows. She took a blow to one knee from the butt end of a spear and then saw a blade heading for her chest and another for her head. *Oh shit, time to try this out for real...*

"Tekkai!" Nami nearly shrieked, and the next second, the two blows struck and bounced off her suddenly reinforced body. Nami blinked, the two attacking Amazons blinked, cocking their heads to one side in dual expressions of puzzlement. Nami recovered first, and her staff lashed out as she shouted, "Impact!"

The blow impacted one Kuja pirate, sending her into two of her fellows and sending both into the side of the gun turret Nami had been using to protect her side so harshly. Nami could see the woman's arms and indeed the chest of the second shattering under the blow.

Thanks To Nami's earlier assault, this meant only two more women outside the two Zoan users remained of the once-mighty Kuja crew. One of them stumbled and looked down at her feet with annoyance, finding a bit of rope that hadn't been there a moment ago. *What the hell is happening on this ship!?* That was the last thought she had before the other end of Nami's staff crashed into her chest. Shock Tempo!"

Again lightning flared, and the woman's eyes rolled back in her head as she spasmed in place. But Nami couldn't dodge or call upon her limited Tekkai before a kick took her in the side. The last Amazon leaped forward and disdaining any kind of fancy trick, herself being bruised and battered, simply bore bodily Nami to the deck.

Nami tried to bring her Impact gauntlet to bear but found it pinned by one of the much stronger woman's hands. The Kuja pirate's other hand grabbed Nami's Hair, and as the navigator shrieked, she slammed Nami's head again and again into the deck until Nami's eyes rolled back into her head.

Seeing that, the woman finally stopped, slumping to one side, staring at the odd gauntlet that Nami had been trying to bring to bear. "I sooo do not want to know what wizardry that thing has in it..." Exhausted and nursing at least a broken rib and a musket ball wound to her outer thigh, the blonde decided to lay next to her victim for a bit, reflecting it was kind of sad they'd had to come to blows so seriously. *Strength and magic like hers would have made this woman an excellent Kuja.*

Thanks to Nami's assault and the rest of the casualties the Kuja pirates had taken, the battle now devolved into two duels. One was a sheer slugfest between the pinned Franky and the furious Marigold. The other, occurring at the ship's prow, hadn't been up until this point. But seeing that Sandersonia was weathering her assault, Makino changed tactics. Instead of relying on the pinpricks of the Busoshoku clade bullets, she charged down into hand-to-hand combat with Sandersonia.

Grinning, Sandersonia reared up, her hair shifting into dozens of snakes and flashing forward like they each had minds of their own. But Makino was fast enough to keep up with her even with Sandersonia using Kenbunshoku, and a second later, a Busoshoku-covered pistol met Busoshoku-covered Zoan. But Makino instantly knew the other woman was better in this kind of fight as more of the woman's hair twisted around, attacking her from multiple angles. She had to add something else to the battle, and after a second, she had an idea. "Eve, reload!" she shouted, even as she kicked out, catching Sandersonia in the side.

But Sandersonia had let that hit land to pull Makino out of position, and now several of her hair snakes struck, biting down far harder than something made out of hair had any right to. Makino yelped in pain, but with her arms covered up to the shoulder with Haki, the strikes couldn't get through, and Makino used a brief second of Soru to break out and get behind Sandersonia. Though Sandersonia sensed this and turned as fast as a snake, she couldn't dodge a blow from one of Makino's pistols, which whipped her across the face.

The pain of that strike, which hit one of Sandersonia's eyes, caused her to lose her concentration and her Kenbunshoku faltered. Now more of Makino's blows landed, and Sandersonia found her movement hampered by the safety railing. More like a wall given how few slats it had, the wall, like the rest of the ship, was made of Adam Wood and several inches thick to give good cover for the crew.

And while Sandersonia and the listening blonde Kuja pirate didn't know what she was shouting about, Eve did. With a grin, she started to grab spare pistols from Makino's room and transporting them up to the main deck, waiting to hurl them out onto the deck. A second later, she saw her chance, and in a shout that roused the blonde to leap to her feet and rush the door, Eve hurled six of Makino's backup pistols into the air over the prow. "Let's hear it for multiple hands and no set body yet. Catch, Makino!"

Makino leaped up, dropping her pistols and grabbing at the new ones, firing them off point-blank into Sandersonia's face. The bullets didn't hurt but caused her to flinch, aimed for

her eyes as they were, but as Makino grabbed two more out of the air, Sandersonia launched her own attack. "Hydra Strike!"

Her fists and hair lashed out so fast that they disappeared, lashing out toward Makino. Knowing she couldn't take that many strikes, Makino gritted her teeth, and the Busoshoku covering her feet and arms spread throughout her body. The blows struck even as she fired back, once more blinding Sandersonia as Makino tucked into a roll, attempting to get under the other woman's guard.

Rolling right in front of the woman, Makino used Geppo to hurl herself up, bouncing off the tall snake woman's body, bringing up both hands joined together, her pistols also glowing with Busoshoku as they crashed up into her chin. The blow caused Sonja's head to rock back, and Sandersonia saw stars. She also didn't see the double pistol whip coming from the side aiming at her face again as Makino kept up the ferocious assault.

Moving around the reeling snake woman's head using Geppo, Makino depended on her own dwindling Busoshoku to protect her from blows of the woman's hair and arms. Sandersonia was pushed so off-balance she didn't even think of using the rest of her snakelike body, not even to ensnare the black-haired woman as she normally would. "Come on, Come on, faalll!" Makino shrieked as she made a conscious decision to husband her will into her attack rather than defense, taking the blows, again and again, grateful for the toughness training Luffy had put her through.

Her body already ravaged by several lightning strikes, and with her eye throbbing, Sandersonia's Busoshoku slipped. When it did, Makino's assault redoubled despite more of Sandersonia's own strikes landing. And eventually, it was Sandersonia whose consciousness finally fled her, and Sandersonia slumped unconscious, her face now several sized larger due to bruises.

The blonde woman gaped at Makino from where she had raced into the ship by the doorway in the conning tower. "H...how, you beat Lady Sandersonia..."

Then Makino dropped her pistol again, pulling out another one Eve had thrown, which she hadn't been able to grab before it hit the deck. The musket ball hit the woman's already badly bruised chest, sending her flying backward into the hallway leading down into the ship, where she slumped into a heap at the bottom of the stairs, unconscious.

Elsewhere, the battle between Marigold and Franky had also finished.

Even as the blonde woman collapsed, so too did Franky slump unconscious, his body unable to give more. "Sh, should've used a Coup de Boo to, to escape. But you're one 'ell of a suuuper woman, you know?" he slurred before one last blow from Marigold knocked him out completely.

Makino was on her before the woman could recover or even release Franky from her King Cobra form's coils. Having raced forward, she had grabbed up Nami's staff, and now it hammered into the side of Marigold's head. "Impact!"

The impact did the trick on top of the damage Franky had done. Worse, the fact Marigold was still wrapped around Franky just meant she couldn't actually move with the blow at all. She was flung backward until she slumped over the side of the *Everlasting Resolve's* railing, blood dripping into the water below.

The woman fell, and Makino gasped, dropping her weapons from numb hands. Slumping to the ground, the former bartender shook her head woozily. "Well, that was a thing," she murmured, shaking her head as she looked over to where Sandersonia lay unconscious. "I so do **not** want to do that again!" Then she turned and began to move over to Laki, finding her legs barely obeying her, so tired was she.

"Amazing. Everything has worked out precisely as Master Moria wanted, Grrr," a voice intoned.

The voice caused Makino to flinch and try to get to her feet, not even thinking of using Tekkai. *Oh no, the invisible M...* "AGH!" Before she could finish the thought, a blow took Makino in the jaw, breaking it, causing her to cry out in agony, followed quickly by another blow that hurled her off her feet.

"Oh crap! Makino, get up! He's coming for you on your starboard!" Eve shouted, her voice coming from all around Makino, beside herself with guilt that she hadn't noticed the invisible man climbing aboard with so much else going on. Looking out, she could see that zombies had rowed a large flatboat out to the *Everlasting Resolve* and were gathering up the floating, unconscious bodies of the Kuja pirates who had fallen into the water, taking control of the ship's boats the women had used as well.

Makino tried, she really tried to get up, but Makino had pushed herself to the ends of her reserve in this fight and she had nothing left to give. The next blow slammed into the back of her head, driving her face first down into the deck, where she joined the rest of the crew in unconsciousness.

"What was that voice that just tried to warn her I was here?" Absalom muttered, scowling as he looked around, coming out of invisibility. He looked much worse for wear as the last time he had stood on the Straw Hat's ship, one eye was closed with blood, he was holding his side gingerly, and his entire body looked as if it had been electrocuted courtesy of Nami. Indeed, most of his upper body and shoulders looked like a mass of bruises. Still, he was alive thanks to the dedication of his few remaining General Zombies, Hildon, and his body's durability given to him by Dr. Hogback.

"And wasn't there someone who had shouted out a warning before too?" But there was no one around, and after a few minutes spent staring at the other Straw Hats, he decided he must have been hearing things. "After all, I'm the one with the Invisible Devil Fruit," Absalom convinced himself, then bent to his work.

Grunting with the effort, he reached down, placing a pair of handcuffs over Makino's arms and only then checked for a pulse. She was still alive, despite the beating Sandersonia had given her and the one he had just delivered. That was pretty impressive, but Absalom didn't want a powerful woman. "No, I want a young woman I can dominate and who has big bazookas!" he chortled aloud, staring around him. "And right now, I am spoiled for choice!"

Looking around, though, Absalom went back to a thought that he had been having ever since the Kuja Pirates had arrived. Why should he limit himself to just one wife? "After all, I'm more than man enough for two..."

Looking around, he spotted the Straw Hat he wanted, the one whose combat skills seemed to be entirely based on the odd staff she had been using. She, like the others, had been beaten unconscious but her leg was also broken. That made it even better, in Absalom's mind.

"Grrr, after the entire destruction of her crew, the Cat Burglar will be so grateful for having been spared, being turned into a shadow, or left to rot with her injury and eventually will come to love me. Whereas the Kuja... they all thought they were so much better than me, but who is laughing now!" He looked around for the Amazon who had most caught his attention beyond Hancock herself, and found her slumped in the opening to the ship's bridge.

The statuesque blond had a chest as large as the orange-haired cat burglar from the Straw Hats, and a face that looked built for smiles. *Yes, she will do nicely.* "All of your shadows will make amazing Zombies, while I will take this one as my second wife!"

"And speaking of zombies..." he looked over to the side of the ship to the small rowboat that he had taken to get back over to the *Everlasting Resolve*. "Get up here."

At his command, several of his own personal command or rather the remnants of that command, the others having been apparently wiped out in the forest against the rest of the Straw Hats, came aboard, followed by a few of the regular zombies. That irked Absalom something fierce, but he would soon have more troops to command. *And two brides, hehe hehe!*

At that thought, Absalom lost himself in a fantasy for a moment, only loud hissing to rouse him out of it. Turning to look to one side, he gasped in air through a battered chest, seeing the two large ocean snakes the Kuja Pirates used to move their ship. "Grrr, you want to stop me, is that it?"

The snakes reared further out of the water, and then their heads darted down toward Absalom and his zombies.

But Absalom was undaunted. he raised his hands and shouted out, "Shisha no Te (Deadman's Hand)!" To the watching zombies and the few bow-snakes around, it looked as if the lion-like man had just launched two energy blasts towards the attacking snakes. The blasts hammered into their heads and sent the snakes reeling. And then John, one of the last remaining General Zombies was attacking. One snake lost its head to his blades, which hewed into it like a pair of scissors, while the other found its eyes stabbed out and falling back into the sea, hissing in serpentine agony as it disappeared into the sea below.

Meanwhile, the remaining bow-snakes had attacked the zombies as they rounded up the bow-snakes' owners. But of course, poison and even constriction didn't do anything to zombies, who killed them as they attacked. Soon enough, the last died, and Absalom sighed, gesturing the zombies back to work. "Come on, gather them all up, like we did with the ones who fell into the water. Remember to put handcuffs on them all, especially that blue-haired man."

Despite his perversions, Absalom was quite intelligent and knew his business well. The rowboat had come packed with handcuffs, and now the Amazons and Straw Hats were loaded into it, separated by the severity of their injuries. That meant that the Straw Hat's marksman and several Kuja pirates were first on their way.

As the second group was gathered up, he held up a hand, pointing to the two officers among the Kuja who were still in their Zoan forms, despite being unconscious. "Wait. Tie them up with rope and drag them behind the ship. Make sure that their heads are above water but nothing else, and keep them that way until we can get some Seastone cuffs."

Seastone was extremely rare except for the Marines, with the WG being the only people able to create it. And to the best of his knowledge, Gecko only had one pair around if that. They'd only been mentioned in passing, so Absalom didn't even know if his Master still had them or if it had been something that someone tried to use on Gecko himself. Still, keeping the two Zoans in seawater would keep them from being able to do anything regardless.

As Nami and the busty blonde Kuja were loaded into the rowboat, Absalom stumbled, nearly going to one knee, before he grabbed the nearby railing. For a moment, he thought something hit his hand, and then he found himself on the ground on the deck, face first, groaning. "Dammit! These fuckers really did a number on me! Even with all of the enhancements Hogback gave me, I can barely move now."

One of his zombies raced over to Absalom, and Absalom gratefully let the creature pull him to his feet, swaying and shaking his head. *I am seriously not in the best of shape!* He thought to himself, looking around at the battered remnants of the other two pirate cruise as

they were slowly tied up and moved to the side, waiting for the rowboat to return. *But at least I'm better off than this lot.*

Watching all this from everywhere at once, Eve could only curse. She tried, she really truly tried, but Eve couldn't push herself out to do anything more than try and trip Absalom up as she had when none of the other zombies or even Absalom were looking. It was simply too much against her nature to appear in front of anyone who wasn't a crew member, and it grew worse and worse with more people. Zombie or living it didn't seem to matter, so Eve was helpless to do anything.

At least until they leave anyway, Eve thought, anger coursing through her. *Then, maybe I'll be able to do something.* She didn't know yet what that might be, but she would certainly do something.

She watched as several zombies came down into the main hold, staring around at the gun deck in some confusion. "Didn't this ship fire a full broadside against the Kuja's ship?"

"Yeah, but I don't see anyone around who could've..." Both zombies looked at one another, then shook their heads. "No, there can't be anyone else invisible. That's Absalom's whole thing!"

Pushing herself, Eve took a chance. She rattled some of the nearby cannonballs in their containers, then began to shift one of the gun mounts as if she was trying to swivel it to turn inward and shoot the zombies within the gun deck.

Both zombies started, staring at where the noise came from, and Eve formed a mouth above them, where they would least expect it, and then behind some hiding places elsewhere on the gun deck. "Leeeaaaave my hooooold! The ghost of the resolve will haunt you foreverrrrr...."

To her shock and great delight, this worked. The two zombies screamed, raced upstairs, muttering to themselves, "No, no, nothing to see here, no one aboard, it's obviously not haunted or anything like that."

Of course, they were heard by Absalom, but he was in no mood to try and get to the bottom of whatever was going on in his current state. He had what he wanted, and frankly, Absalom knew that if he didn't get some medical attention soon, he would collapse.

"Grrr, you two," he ordered, staring at the scaredy-cats, "just earned ourselves a permanent stay aboard this ship until Perona or someone else comes around. The rest of us, let's get off this ship, get the prisoners into jail, and then will send word to master Moria."

"No need," Hildon announced, coming out of the constant fog that enveloped this area of the ocean. "I will take word of this victory to the Master. What will you be doing instead? There are still at least two Straw Hats still freed out there."

Absalom shuddered at the very idea of fighting either the ship's captain or that blonde bastard who had pounded him into the ground. Even from here, Absalom could hear the thunderous retort of the blows being exchanged between the Shichibukai and the upstart rookie, and the idea was terrifying. As for the blonde, a part of Absalom did want some vengeance on him, but the vast majority of him knew he was in no shape to take it. Instead, Absalom smiled thinly. "I will be taking my share of the plunder," he said calmly, then began to laugh. "Haahahaha, My plunder and my brides!"

He began to chortle, his hands twitching, until he subsided into a hacking cough, as sweatdrops abounded on the watching zombies.

OOOOOOO

Shivering in shock, Rolling Pirates Captain Charlotte Lola pushed herself to her feet, awed at the sheer power she had felt just then. *Someone with that powerful a Haoshoku, in Paradise! And not just in Paradise, but a rookie! No wonder the World Government decided to send multiple Shichibukai against him.*

"Right!" She looked around at her crew and with a certain amount of pleasure raised her fists, bringing down on the heads of her two chief subordinates, snarling, "Get up, you idiots! How dare you be knocked out by just that bit of Haoshoku!"

"W, what was it?" one of them groaned, raising one hand to run it through extremely frizzy orange hair. "It felt like someone was trying to freaking sit on every part of my body."

"A freaking elephant, no, a damn herd of them one on top of another," the other one muttered, shaking his head from side to side and blinking rapidly. He was a tallish, orange-haired man wearing a striped shirt, his hair in insane frizz around his head. He was the oldest Risky Brother, Oran.

"Yeah, well, hopefully, we won't run into anything more like that," Lola muttered. *Dammit, I thought I left monsters like that behind when I left the New World, and the first thing I do is I run into a Shichibukai! And now, the person who may save us has the Haoshoku!*

"Yeah, but you haven't explained..." Oran stammered.

"No time, you probably wouldn't understand anyway," Lola muttered, pushing herself to her feet, groaning. Her whole body ached, and she was born in the New World to one of the Yonko, for goodness' sake! *If I'm feeling like this, most of my crew is probably out of it. And that's well beyond where the fight's actually happening.*

Still... we have to take this chance. We have to! I don't know how much longer we can all stay sane living as we have always running, always afraid, never seeing the sun. With that, Lola shook her head, smacking her cheeks and gesturing towards the mast-keep in the distance. "Come one, we need to get moving. Now more than ever, I think that this crew of pirates is our best chance at rebelling against Moria."

"How? I mean..." The second Risky Brother, Raul, a man who wore a mask and was far shorter than his brother, began but was quickly hushed by Oran, who pointed out in a direction through the woods. Quickly all of them hid away, watching as a procession of most of the remaining zombies in the forest appeared, each of them carrying a prisoner trussed up by one of the spider monkeys.

"Well, it looks like the inevitable betrayal has occurred," Lola muttered, laughing quietly to herself, staring out from her hiding place. "Honestly, did the Pirate Empress or the World Government really trust Moria to not try to take advantage of things?" *It's a pity there's no way any of us could get close enough to tell the Pirate Empress that Moria's betrayed her.*

Oran shook his head. "Yeah, but what should we do? My prospective boss, all of this means that we only have two of these Straw Hats characters to rely on to free the rest of us. Unless you think any of them are going to keep fighting once Moria steals their shadow."

"Maybe, but..." Lola bit her lip, tapping one hand against her thigh in annoyance, then flinched, hearing the shout of her shadow zombie through the woods, as the strange zombie raced towards the figure of Absalom.

Its war cry should not have been terrifying, but from the cry of fear from the lion-man, it certainly was doing the job. "Absalom! Marry me!"

As the warthog-zombie in the wedding dress smashed through the woods towards her target and said target fled like his life was in danger, Lola watched, shaking her head. While normally, the sight would have just infuriated Lola, reminding her that her shadow had been stolen by Gecko Moria, watching this, a sense of pride went through her at the amount of persistence her shadow showed. *Absalom might not be my type, but you go get him, girl!*

Hearing a booming crash as her zombie raced out of sight after Absalom, Lola watched, calculating the number of zombies she could see, and then finally, decided. "Here's what we're going to do..."

Moments later, Lola led those of her crew able to move towards the castle through Perona's zombie zone. Most of the 'cute' zombies had been sent out to help the experimental zombies in the forest and 'died' there. Survivors from the forest, along with, Lola admitted ruefully, a large number of Moria's other victims had been knocked out by Straw Hat's Haoshoku. Those that hadn't, Lola had seen helping transport the prisoners, putting them on the opposite side of the castle from this entrance.

Each of her crew was armed, both with weapons and with salt. They had ransacked several of the ships captured after their initial run-in with Thriller Bark and its inhabitants and had enough salt to give everyone a dozen tiny packages of the stuff. Delivering them was still a lot of trouble, though, as none of her crew had an existing skill with slings or any other kind of weapon that could do the job.

That meant most had to stuff them into the zombie's mouths by hand. This was but one of several reasons why this was the first time Lola had decided she and her people had a chance at fighting back. But the sheer number of zombies the Straw Hats had already cleared out, and the sound of the ongoing fights combined with simple desperation made Lola want to make a bid for freedom.

The castle's entrance side was in sight when two zombies burst out from either side of the pirates. One of them was Hippo Gentleman, who was built somewhat like Lola's zombie but male and with a hippo face. He was vice-captain of Perona's Wild Zombies and now bellowed in anger. "What are you lot doing here! Just because master Moria allows you all to live so that we can keep using your shadow doesn't mean we're going to let you run wild when we're already dealing with so much trouble!"

Lola charged towards him, wielding a sword and shield like Hippo Gentleman, lashing out with her blade, which he blocked, although the strike sent him stumbling backward. "Triple team the other one!"

Her sailors instantly obeyed. Oran and Raul charged forward to try and fight the zombie hand to hand while the third held back. He was a former civilian sailor and held a slingshot in one hand, his belt festooned with tiny salt packets.

Another zombie joined the fight quickly as the sounds of it spread, but Lola had no time to concern herself with that, fighting Hippo Gentleman in front of her rather desperately. The zombie was faster and stronger than her but wasn't quite as nimble, nor would it normally be as skilled, but that hardly mattered thanks to how close the zombies had gotten before Lola and her crew had spotted them. The zombie barreled in, his initial charge nearly taking Lola off her feet, but she recovered and struck back. Soon her shield was hacked to pieces, and her sword arm was going numb as the zombie just started to overwhelm her.

When her riposte sent Hippo Gentleman's sword side, Lola thrust forward, but her sword bounced off the zombie's shield, and the warthog laughed, pushing her blade out of the way and hacking down at her leg. "I might not be allowed to kill you, but that doesn't mean I can't make your life even more miserable than it already is!"

Taking the opportunity this provided, Lola leaped up over the blade, bringing down her own again, watching as he blocked it with his sword. Then, her other hand flicked out underneath his shield, tossing a salt packet right into his mouth.

The warthog automatically gulped, and Lola watched as the shadow was immediately expelled. Unfortunately, it wasn't for any of her men, the shadow racing away in a different direction, but it was a start.

The other two zombies pushed her men hard, the slinger not getting a free shot until she charged in. One of them turned, his mouth open as he rushed to engage Lola and the slinger took a chance. The next second, the packet of salt smacked into its open mouth. That left the three pirates to hack the other zombie into pieces which eventually allowed the slinger to get in a lucky shot, purifying the last zombie.

"Right, let's get a move on," Lola gasped, wringing out her aching arm, and shaking her head. *Thank God Kumashi isn't around here! Or that there isn't more of them.* Zombies were just tougher and stronger than normal people, and even though she came from the New World, Lola still thought of herself as a normal person.

"She does know that we were nearly just beaten by three zombies, right?" Muttered Raul.

"Hey, she was able to tie up on her own. The captain is a real monster," Opined Oran.

Lola led the way up and into the real castle, then scowled, thinking. "Okay, knowing Moria, he'll probably be in the safest place possible, up top. That means we don't have to deal with him, but Perona is still around here, and it would only take one Negative Hollow to sink us all, so..."

"Are you sure about that, boss? It didn't seem too safe when the Straw Hats ship fired that whatever-it-was attack."

"Yes, but they haven't fired it since. And we all saw the Amazons and the Straw Hats being transported into the keep," Lola frowned, thinking.

Once or twice, one of the stranded crews had been able to sneak into the castle, looking around for anything they could use. That was how they had learned the secret of salt, and they knew something of the layout of the castle's interior because of that. "You're right. Even with that, we can't know where Moria is, and there's still the Ghost Princess to consider. We can't try to free the recent prisoners without some way to counter her and her ghosts. Instead, we'll go after the swordsman. If we go after the swordsman, all we'll have to do it deal with is surprise zombies."

I hope, she added internally. Despite their minor win outside, she knew for a fact that her people were not up to any pitched battle. Not only were they out of practice, but many of them were still nursing injuries they had taken both in the initial conflict with Moria's followers and after. Moria was always careful to kill any ship's doctors his zombies captured, to make his victims even weaker,

With Lola in the lead, they made their way through the back corridors of the keep heading downwards. The bottommost level of the keep, which was actually in the bedrock of the island the main portion of the ship had been created from, was where they kept living prisoners who had proven to be too troublesome. Enough isolation and starvation would break the hardest of wills, eventually, at which point the prisoner would be released.

As they went, they dealt with several Surprise zombies. Two of them burst out of pictures in the walls, shouting out, "Intruders! Capture them for Master Moria!"

"Been there, done that," Lola shouted back, charging into one of them, her sword clashing against the picture's. She smashed it to one side and then grabbed the picture by the throat, pulling it further out and letting one of her men dump a bit of salt into his mouth.

The other had been gang-tackled by several of her men, who are now basically being flung around like they weighed next to nothing. The picture's mouth was tightly shut as it smashed her men into either wall and even against the ceiling, mumbling, "You'll never get away with this!"

Then Lola kicked up off of the ground and then off the side of the hallway, flipping upwards. From there, she came down, landing on top of the zombie. Her added weight was finally enough to drive it into the ground, and when it struck, the zombie let out a gasp, making Lola reflect that some things that the shadow retained from life made no sense whatsoever.

After all, zombies don't actually have to breathe, and paintings sure as heck don't either. Why not just sew their mouths shut or something? Then she shook her head very purposefully. *Nope, don't think like that. Just be thankful that Moria's lazy and complacent.*

Even as she was thinking that one of her men had stuffed this zombie's mouth with another salt packet, and they quickly moved on, nursing their bruises. Raul had his arm broken, though and was now next to useless, which meant the fighting would only get more difficult from here on.

The door to the dungeon also proved to be a zombie. Although it really didn't have much in the way of offense, it held them off for some time because it didn't have a mouth at all, forcing them to hack it to pieces. And even when they had, the pieces continued to twitch, causing everyone to flinch away from them. Thankfully the noise didn't bring any other zombies running, or heaven forbid, one of Perona's Negative Hollows.

Down a short flight of steps, they found themselves coming to the door leading directly into the dungeon. But here, there weren't even any torches, the dark working as part of the torture of the troublesome prisoners within. Seeing all of her men quailing at the sight of the darkness beyond the door, Lola sighed and gestured for them to wait where they were. "You lot wait here. Shriek if anything happens."

"You don't have to tell us twice, boss," one of them said, nearly hysterical with fear. Indeed, all of them were looking afraid now. They had never gotten this far into the keep before and the attacks they had dealt with warned of still worse dangers to come.

On the other hand, Lola was feeling quite upbeat. This was going about as well as she could have expected. *And now, for the moment of truth*, she thought as she took one of the nearby torches and entered the prison.

Inside, there were only two prisoners, both in their own separate cells. One of them was the Singing Skeleton, who Lola had seen fighting with Shimotsuki Ryuma, before the two Straw Hats had shown up. He was chained against the wall by a single chain.

In stark contrast, the dual sword wielder was chained up in a surprising number of chains, one could almost say a plethora. In fact, Lola could barely see even a bit of hair sticking out of the top, which made Lola wonder if that was actually the man she was here to find. "Is that the one who was fighting against Ryuma?" she asked, looking over at the skeleton, shivering slightly at the sight of it. But, given how it had also been fighting Ryuma and left behind a dozen purified zombies, it was very obviously not on Moria's side and that was enough for her.

The afro-wearing creature slowly looked up, seemingly lost in its own gloom. "Ah, a lady. I would stand, but as you can see, I am quite out of sorts at the moment. You will have to forgive my lack of manners. Do you mind if I see your panties?"

Lola absentmindedly reached through the bars and smacked him with the hilt of her sword, then looked over at the bundle of chains. "You didn't answer my question. Is that the Straw Hat's swordsman?"

"He is, might I inquire Madame, who you are and what is your interest in Zoro?"

"Zoro, that's his name. We couldn't overhear their conversation from where we were. I'm Lola, and I represent...well, Moria's victims, really."

That caused Brook to nod, his afro bobbing and creating weird shadows in the light of the torch. "Ah, your shadows were taken, and you were released into the forest?"

"Yeah," Lola said, raising her sword. "Now, let's see that I can get some of these free." Unfortunately, Lola's attempts to cut the chains failed miserably. Fearing she would hurt Zoro, she couldn't swing her sword hard enough to cut the metal.

"Ah, Madame, if you would but free me? I believe my sword is over by the door. Unlike Zoro, I suppose I don't really matter as a threat," Brook opined, his tone bitter. "But that doesn't mean I am without recourse."

Looking around, Lola found the afro skeleton's sword and brought it over, using her own blade to slice the single-chain connecting him to the wall away. "What do you mean?"

Brook smiled, then moved over to Zoro, and with his smaller blade stabbed into the links of chains, shattered them in that manner. This took some time but soon Brook and Lola had Zoro freed from his chain cocoon.

However, these actions hadn't woken Zoro up, and Lola stared at the unconscious swordsman before remembering. "Right, his shadow was just taken. Do you know enough about him to get him up?"

Brooks thought about it for a moment, shrugged and said, "Zoro-san, Ryuma is here to challenge you once more."

For a moment, nothing happened, and then, the swordsman raised his head, one eyebrow rising. "Challenge?"

Lola gaped then shook her head, coming back to herself. "Amazing, you are so single-minded! Please marry me."

"Wait, what, I'm confused," Zoro muttered, staring around himself, "also, no."

"This is Lola-san, Zoro-san. She says she is the leader of Moria's victims and is here to help us," Brook said, lowering his blade.

Zoro nodded, stretching his arms, then noticed the chains scattered around him, looking up at Brook. "You freed me then?"

"I did indeed. It is the least I can do for the help you have already given me."

Zoro waved that off. "That fight was mostly from me anyway. I still want that sword! I could feel it resonating with me already." Then his eyes widened, and he looked around before his face clouded thunderously. "Where are my swords?!" he groaned out through clenched teeth.

"Unfortunately, it seems as if you made enough trouble that Moria's normal lackadaisical air towards people he's taken the shadow of was set to one side. I have no idea where they are," Lola admitted.

"Shit!" Zoro cursed, then blinked as a booming sound came from above them, and the entire Thriller Bark shook.

"What the hell?"

"That's probably your captain unless something else has been going on," Lola said, shaking her head. "He's fighting Moria and two other Shichibukai."

Zoro's face paled, and his eyes narrowed. While he was entirely too concentrated on swords, training and duels for anyone to call him properly balanced, Zoro was actually quite intelligent and he could easily understand what was happening here. "The WeeGee. Fuck. Who is it?"

"The pirate Empress and the Tyrant," Lola supplied.

That caused Zoro to scowl. The Tyrant he'd heard of and knew as a fearsome enemy, but while he knew the name of the Pirate Empress, he had no idea about her combat abilities. *Still, without my swords, I'm next to useless anyway! I'd probably do well enough as a meat shield but that's about it.*

"Wait a second," he said slowly, thinking about what he knew about Haki and Kenbunshoku. "I have something I want to try..."

With that, Zoro closed his eyes, bringing his hands together in front of him, one on top of the other. He hadn't made any progress with Kenbunshoku as he had with Busoshoku, but Zoro hoped that his connection to his swords would enable him to discover their location.

After a few moments, he felt them. They were quite distinct personalities to his senses even now. The calm, inhuman personality of Wado Ichimonji, its thoughts and personality placid like a river but just as inexorable. And the nearly feral, bloodthirsty and demanding nature of Sendai Kitetsu. It was even angrier than normal now, while Wado seemed to accept and ignore their current plight.

They were close together, and he pointed in their general direction. "That way." The direction he pointed was up and to the side, through several stories and the roof.

Lola frowned, trying to visualize a map of the keep, thinking. "I'm not certain what is in that direction from here."

"Who cares? I know what direction I need to go," Zoro stated before asking rhetorically, "Why would I turn away from it."

With that, he used Geppo to bounce in the air, where he raised his fist and smashed it into the ceiling, creating a hole, which he then promptly hopped through.

The others gaped after him, and Lola shouted, "I was serious about the marriage, you now."

"And I was serious about saying no!" came Zoro's shouted reply.

Behind him, Brook chuckled, then bowed grandly to Lola. "Well, while it hurts on a bone-deep level HOHOHO, skull joke, that you didn't have any desire to marry me, I believe that you should consider me under your command for the moment. You seem to have a plan, and other than once more attempting to take my shadow back, I am afraid I have none."

"Then let us get out of here. When we have the rest of my crew awake again, we can free the other Straw Hats," Lola answered. "So long as that cook and the captain can keep Moria and his fellows from interfering anyway."

Brook nodded and the two of them left to meet up with Lola's other followers.

OOOOOOO

It had taken more than an hour and a half, but **finally**, the Pirate Hunter's shadow had fully integrated into the giant zombie. For a moment, nothing happened, but Moria could feel it, the shadow spreading within the zombie, creating the twisted parody of life within its previously frozen, dead shell.

Moments later, the zombie's one eye opened, and its shoulders twitched as it made to raise its arms above its head, instead smashing them into either side of the giant refrigerator that had been its resting place. "Ah, what a great nap."

That somewhat confused Moria. When a shadow woke up in its new home, most of the time, the shadows usually still had some connection to their past life. How long those vestiges lasted was a testament to how strong the shadow was, but eventually, even the strongest would be subsumed to a certain degree by the memories built into their new undead body and the overriding loyalty the shadows had to pay to him.

Moria had expected the zombie to shout something about his swords or perhaps have a memory of Zoro's fight against Ryuma. *Still, it's nice to meet another nap connoisseur.* "Kishishishishi! Well, I'm glad you enjoyed your nap. And now, you will obey my commands, yes?"

The giant looked down at him, then cocked his head, his eye narrowing dangerously. "I don't even know who you are. Why would I obey you when I have my dream?" At that point, Zoro's shadow said one of the lines that Moria had thought he would hear. "Now, where are my swords?"

Oz looked down at his massive hands, then sighed. "I'll have to find myself some, I suppose." With that, he began to climb his way out of the freezer.

"Stop! I command it," Moria growled out, his will bearing down on the shadow within the zombie. Normally he would let this aspect go at its own pace, but after waiting so long, he

had no desire to wait even longer to bring Oz into the battles still raging outside. "You are mine to command, Oz."

But to Moria's shock, the shadow resisted him. Perhaps that was simply because Zoro the original was that tenacious. Perhaps it was because Zoro had been trained to his Haki, which had an add-on effect to his willpower. Perhaps it was because of the zombie body's own strength and stubbornness. Whatever the case, the zombie roared in reply and smashed the wall of his freezer with a single blow, leaping out and into the air beyond.

As big as Oz was, the mast was far, far bigger, a literal mountain-sized mixture of a defensive structure and an actual mast. It had to be to move the monstrously big ship that was Thriller Bark, the largest known ship in the world by a significant margin.

As he plummeted down toward the ground, Oz roared, "I don't care what you say! I will be the greatest giant swordsman in the world!"

A second later, he landed on the ground far below with a booming crash that was heard from one side of the massive ship to another. It also caused an earthquake throughout the small island that Moria had used to create his ship, doing a lot of damage to the lower levels of the keep.

Well below where Moria was sitting, Perona stared at the segment of the roof that had nearly crushed her bed, hidden as it was near the center of the keep. Lola, Brook and her fellows screamed and tried to find someplace to hide as segments of the wall and ceiling collapsed, while Zoro simply huffed and continued on his way, smashing aside every bit of stone in his way as he followed the feel of his swords.

High above all this, Moria didn't notice the damage done below him, too busy battering aside rocks that would've otherwise crushed him. He couldn't call his shadow back to do it for him, as the battle with Luffy had moved so far away from the keep and Moria was unwilling to teleport to it just yet.

As the rubble subsided, Moria stared out of the hole Oz had made, shaking his head, although he made no move from here, he was leaning against the wall. "I can already tell that one's going to be a problem child." He then laughed. "Kishishishishi but then again, why should I care? Most of these Straw Hats are already beaten, the Amazons are already captured. The last free Straw Hat is being beaten by Kuma, and Straw Hat and Hancock are busy clawing at one another's throats. Life is good."

As he heard another booming sound from over the forest, a faint scowl appealing on his blue face for a moment. "The damage done to Thriller Bark, that's a bit of annoyance. But even so, it should be easy to repair once I have enough zombies to toss at the problem. I may have to hunt down those refugees and free the shadows they've captured, though, just to make up the Kishishishishi warm bodies."

Moria's monologue broke off as suddenly a wrenching noise came from below as if something metal was being torn asunder. This went on for at least five minutes by the clock, then Oz's voice echoed up to him. "I suppose that until I find my swords, these will have to do. And this thing'll do as a target to see if my attacks will work with something so blunt."

Moria blinked, then hopped to his feet and ran to the edge of the hole Oz had made with an alacrity that belied his slug-like bulk, grabbing out a long spyglass and staring down towards the distant ground. Down below, he saw Oz taking a stance, with two large segments of metal he must have torn from the collapsed mainmast of Thriller Bark where it had fallen from high above Moria's current position. And the giant was facing towards the mast/keep!

"Oh, this is not going to be fine," Moria shouted before sending for his shadow. Then as he felt it come close, Mora switched places with it in a move that he called shadow walking. From his new vantage point in a window leading into Hogback's quarters within the mast-keep, Moria watched the giant take a stance aiming well above Moria's new position.

The stance had both 'swords,' a simple, huge blunt segments of metal warped into the shape of swords over one shoulder. One was directly behind Oz's at an angle, the other held at a slightly different position so that the two attacks would strike at the same target one after another. If that is, Oz was just attacking physically. But Oz had a different idea to test out his makeshift weapons. "76 Giant Cannon Blast!"

As the giant twisted in place, the blunt weapons in his hand glowed and then lanced out with a modified air pressure attack that lanced upwards. A second later, it crashed into the side of the mast, making it explode like it had been hit by several thousand Rankyaku at once. Once more, the mainmast of Thriller Bark became significantly shorter than it had been a moment before. The attack was so powerful debris flew far enough that some of it hit the open ocean beyond the outer wall-like hull of Thriller Bark, while the strike also caused even more damage to the interior of the keep, causing large segments of its upper stories to start to collapse inward below where the strike had impacted.

As the bits and pieces of the castle fell all around him, Oz held up the weapons in his hands, shaking his head with a scowl. "Hmmp, they are way too blunt. Still, that will have to do until I find my real swords."

Oz continued to scowl as he dropped one of his makeshift weapons to tug at a tusk thoughtfully. "I know they have to be around here somewhere. I can remember holding them in my hands... funny thing is, I could swear my hands were white in my memory, not pink. And way smaller..." After a second, Oz shook that mystery off, staring around him thoughtfully. "Now, I wonder where I dropped them?"

Watching Oz stomp off, changing directions at seemingly random moments, Moria grimaced. But swiftly that grimace faded as he contemplated the raw destructive potential of his newest zombie.

"M, Master Moria, that was a disaster!" Hildon shouted, landing nearby.

"Kishishishishi! It's Just growing pains, don't worry about it," Moria said with a laugh. "Besides, imagine that kind of force applied to our enemies."

"But master Moria, he just destroyed a large portion of your castle and could have killed both you and Mistress Perona, to say nothing of Absalom and the remaining zombies!" Hildon argued back. He'd nearly been flattened over a dozen times as he flew through the debris just now and was noticeably upset.

"Yes, and once the will of the shadow has been subsumed to mine, Oz will help me repair it too. And if Absalom has died as Hogback did, I can just raise him as a zombie," Moria said, laughing louder than ever now. "Kishishishishi. Maybe he and Lola will get along then."

Hearing his master laugh at such things, Hildon could only sigh. But he said nothing in denouncement of the idea. After all, why would he? Hildon was a zombie himself. "Bu, but Master Moria, the damage to Thriller bark is getting severe! I saw large cracks in the ground, and one of the other masts has also been destroyed.

That caused Gecko to scowl. "Hmmp. In that case, I suppose I cannot wait for Oz to be useful. Pity. Head back up and keep an eye on him. Once he shows signs of coming under my control, guide him to me."

Then both fell silent, staring as an explosion well beyond the attack Oz had used erupted in the distance. "Wh... what was that!?"

"Feh, damn Kuma, showing off like that. Yet more damage done to my ship," Gecko grumbled, smacking Hildon on the head lightly, sending him tumbling. Although that could also have been caused by the rocking the mast-tower was doing thanks to the reverberations from Kuma's attack. "Go on, get out of here."

Hildon shivered, but as Gecko glared at him, obeyed, instantly becoming thankful that Oz hadn't gone in that direction. Instead, he was heading towards the aft section of Thriller Bark, directly opposite where the 'welcome mouth' resided.

Staring out at the explosion, Gecko thought about looking into what had occurred to force Kuma to use that kind of an attack. But then he shook his head. The World Government whipping boy wasn't his concern.

With that thought, Moria sent his shadow flashing out, waiting for it to arrive where he wanted it to be once more. At the same time, he tilted his head back and breathed in, and all the shadows of the destroyed zombies were pulled towards him. And for the second time that day, Gecko Moria grew, gaining power as he fed on the shadows of his victims. "Kishishishishi!"

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For more than forty minutes, Kuma's annoyance with Sanji had continued to escalate. *In the air, this is much like a gargoyle facing off against an eagle*, Kuma mused as he continued to launch attacks Sanji's way. *The eagle cannot really damage the gargoyle but can certainly move faster and is far more maneuverable in the air, dodging the gargoyle's clumsy attacks.*

I had not realized it before, but perhaps my palm-based style is too linear if someone can keep up with my speed. Regardless, the gargoyle will eventually win. It, that is, I need only one good shot. Now, if only the eagle could realize the futility of this!

By this point, they had bounced and wound their way up over the air of the Thriller Bark, and glancing to one side, Kuma realized they were now over the water, the sunken zone of the large vessel filled with seawater.

For his part, Sanji had no time to think up colorful allusion while trying his best to get around the Shichibukai's palm-based style, but nothing he was doing was getting through Kuma's defenses. Only one out of every five attacks he launched could even touch the other pirate despite his best efforts to randomize and change the angle of his kicks last-second. *Damn it, I thought my idea of maybe launching attacks at his fingers or feet would work, but he's too quick to notice the shift in my attacks to let them through on his feet and is way too fast to dodge! Worse, his fingers are reinforced somehow, so the few times I've smacked his thumb or one of his other finger's I've done nothing.*

As he thought that, Sanji pulled back another kick, letting himself fall through the air for a second before righting himself and bouncing back upwards. A series of bounces and dodged brought him once more above Kuma, having avoided Kuma's palm touching his leg once more.

And it would take just one moment of inattention to hurl me aside like a piece of pizza dough. it's time to change tactics, I think. What did Luffy call it? The 'Make 'em Mad, Make 'em Stupid' technique? With that, Sanji put a sarcastic, confident smirk on his face, trying to copy the same one he had seen on Luffy and Nami's faces occasionally. "So, can I ask, what came first, the chicken or the egg? I mean, were you a cyborg before you became the whipping boy of the WeeGee, or did you become their cabin boy after the WeeGee messed with your head?"

Even that didn't get a rise out of the Shichibukai. He simply turned in place, launching another attack up towards where Sanji was bouncing around his head.

Dodging the strike with some difficulty, Sanji continued his verbal assault. "I mean, they had to have done something to your brain, right? You're the only one of the Shichibukai's who is better known for following the WeeGee's orders than being a pirate. It's almost a public scandal how close you are to the WeeGee. I wonder, did they pay you for it, in favors or what-have-you? Or was there some big dark secret they found out and held over your head? A family

held hostage? Or maybe you trusted them to cure a disease or something, and they took advantage of your naïve, almost virginal nature," he taunted.

That last series of digs seemed to finally get through, and a frown appeared on the Shichibukai's, although he didn't respond verbally. But the next assault came in the form of several hundred quickly made and released Pad Bombs. For each Pad Bomb, Kuma's fingers gathered and then cut off palm-sized segments of air which were flung forward. Now his fingers flashed so fast it almost looked childish, like a kid making a shadow puppet talk.

The attack however was anything but funny and should have covered the entire area around Kuma with small explosions. But when the bombs went off tearing the surrounding fog into shreds, Sanji wasn't there. He had canceled his Geppo the moment the attack began and dropped through the air until he was below Kuma.

Then he flipped himself onto his hands, using them to create the Geppo effect. "Anti-Manner Kick Course!" Sanji shouted, lashing out with kicks towards Kuma's lower body.

Attacking from directly below like this so quickly allowed Sanji to get under his opponent's defenses, and Sanji realized even as his attacks struck home that he had made a mistake initially about thinking that height was always a good thing in air combat, something that Luffy had drilled into him. *Nice to know he was wrong about something when it comes to aerial combat for once*, Sanji thought with an internal chuckle,

However, his attack was interrupted, as one of his feet found was caught by a light pad touch. Kuma had been able to get his paw underneath the attack and now his Nikyu Nikyu Devil Fruit's powers flung Sanji away.

Sanji found himself cartwheeling through the air, while Kuma grimaced in annoyance. He had attempted to do the same long-distance blow that he had used previously on the captain but hadn't had time to set it up. Instead, Sanji slammed back into the wall of Thriller Bark again, cracking it a bit, but was able to push himself away and roll to one side before using one hand and a foot to Geppo back up into the air, lashing out with a kick.

He still couldn't dodge the next attack, which consisted of dozens of small pressure attacks. "Tsuppari Pad Ho."

Sanji grimaced, but his body was briefly covered in Busoshoku as the attack landed. This allowed him to bounce away teeth gritted in pain as the Busoshoku faded. He wasn't good enough with that technique to use it over his entire body, while under such an assault.

Again, Kuma frowned in annoyance. It was clear that this crew was indeed very strong, especially for rookies. *Why couldn't the reports on the rest of them be as thorough as the one on Straw Hat?*

Setting aside that concern, Kuma pressed his advantage, and now it was Sanji who fell back. But instead of just retreating backward or upward, where he might have been able to break off, Sanji retreated downward.

Because Sanji had a plan. While training with them, Luffy had noticed that Sanji was perhaps the most tactically minded, besides maybe Robin. And he well knew that one of the most deadly weaknesses Devil Fruit users had was the ocean.

When they were right above the water, Sanji struck out. Instead of attacking Kuma directly, one leg lashed down into the air into the water, kicking it up into the Shichibukai's face. The Shichibukai however, merely smacked the entire wave of water away with one hand. But that momentary distraction was enough.

"Diable Jambel!" As Sanji spun in place, his feet became covered with Busoshoku and then began to glow with heat, looking like they were almost on fire. A heated foot then slammed down into the water, created an explosion of steam, which rose into the air obscuring Sanji for a moment. "Steam Cooking!"

Instantly Kuma gained altitude, staring all around him, but three more booming steam explosions erupted from the water as Sanji moved around their position and then Sanji was below Kuma, his legs flashing upwards. Several strong Busoshoku-enhanced blows crashed into Kuma's thigh and lower leg, and metal crumpled as his pants flashed into ash where the blows landed, along with large chunks of the thin skin-like covering his legs. Much like the fake skin Franky won on his metal hand, that cover was very thin.

Kuma grunted now in real pain as his leg started to not respond to his commands. Then another blow crashed into his chest, and Kuma's attempt to lash out took Kuma's arm out of position. Another kick from Sanji landed straight into his guts, bending the cyborg's metal there sending him backward.

Not letting up, Sanji bounced up through the air as fast as he could, coming back down on Kuma. Before the Shichibukai could turn, two Busoshoku-clad feet slammed into his back, causing a large dent there while Sanji shouted out, "Double Mutton Shot, Black Pepper Version!"

The momentum of this blow also hurled Kuma out of the air like a meteor. Staring down at the water, the Devil Fruit user realized Black Leg's plan. *He means to use the water against me!*

Desperately, Kuma used one hand to release a Pad Bomb right behind him, searing off some of his own shirt, but knocking Sanji away, then he used his other hand to thrust forward. "Pad Bounce!"

The Pad Bounce was how Kuma generally moved about, while going from island to island. It pushed off whatever Kuma aimed his hand pads at and let him simply fly around as easily as Kizaru, the marine Light Logia user, could. One moment, he was in danger of crashing into the ocean below, the next, he was landing back on the island, although he scowled angrily when his leg couldn't take his weight, nearly sending him to his knees.

Looking down, he saw his knee was at a very wrong angle, and much of the skin had been exploded off from the superheated Busoshoku blows. Metal could be seen over his thigh and lower leg, while cloth and skin still blocked the damage to his knee from sight, although it was obvious despite that.

Hurrying after him with another use of Fast Food Service, Sanji landed nearby, whuffing for a second. That had taken it out of him, and now his legs were starting to throb fiercely. But he was nowhere near done, and he smirked slightly at the Shichibukai, fighting the urge to light up a cigarette as he looked at him. "Full-on cyborg just like I said. I wonder, between you and Frankie, which has more metal? Of course, I know Frankie did the work on himself to save his life. I doubt you had such motives..." He laughed then. "And I doubt he removed everything that made him a man like you must have to obey the WeeGee like you do."

Again this won a grimace from the Shichibukai, and this time it was a very angry-looking one. *Make him mad make him stupid*, Sanji thought, as he charged forwards, intent on taking advantage of the Shichibukai's anger and his wounds.

Kuma had never been in a position like this before. He had never been forced to rely on only one leg, which hampered his speed and gave the advantage in the air entirely over to Sanji, removing any ability to use Geppo he had. If he tried, Kuma would be forced to use one hand to bounce off the ground at all times.

Luckily, staying on the ground played into his defensive style, and Kuma instantly shifted entirely to the defense, allowing Kuma to conserve his energy. "Puni Stance," he intoned, his hands moving blindly fast, redirecting or halting Sanji's assaults, a grimace on his face even so.

Meanwhile, Kuma concentrated on making his defense seem to be more and more about his Paw powers, lulling Sanji somewhat, convincing the leg-user that Kuma was so much on the backfoot that he couldn't launch attacks of his own.

Finally, Kuma saw his chance. When Sanji went to attack once more, the palm that moved to intercept his attack didn't actually do so. Instead, a small Pad Bomb erupted from it, going off instantly and hurling Sanji away. That gave Kuma enough time to set up another attack, which he did with alacrity, a Tsuppari Pad Ho that forced Sanji back, although he used dozens of Rankyaku to explode the Pad Hos before they could get close. One even soared through the Shichibukai's attacks, crashing into his face and slicing away some more of the thin skin graft he wore over his metal frame.

Ignoring this attack and even the feel of the flap of skin falling away, Kuma opened his mouth. From the back of his mouth an energy beam appeared then flashed forward.

"GAHhhh!" Sanji grunted and ducked to one side, taking several hits from the Pad Ho attacks, but trusting in his Busoshoku against that attack rather than that laser attack, which reminded him way too much of one of Luffy's lightning-based power. The laser thus went wide, doing still more damage to the forest and, incidentally, destroying one of the hiding spots that Lola and the rest of Moria's victims had used previously to hide.

Two of them died in the resulting explosion but the others were able to scamper away, fleeing through the forest, disorganized and demoralized, all of them understanding what had happened. Not only had they been brushed aside, but they also hadn't even been noticed by the two battling titans. "Truly" one of them bemoaned, "it's a dog-eat-dog world and we're at the bottom of the barrel!"

Back with the fighters who had caused this damage, Kuma's dual attack had allowed the Shichibukai time to set up his next assault. As Sanji slowly got to his feet, he saw Kuma across from him, a good distance away, twice that which he had been previously. And between his hands was a slowly shrinking bubble of air, the sides pulsing as Kuma used his Nikyu Nikyu powers on it, condensing it further.

Kuma stared at Sanji, his face showing a certain amount of respect even as he launched the attack, his pad-covered hands moving from cupping the attacks to being behind it, his hands noticeably jolting forward as he continued to use his Nikyu Nikyu Devil Fruit to send this attack towards Sanji. "Goodbye, Black Leg Sanji. Ursus Shock, speed version."

The small, tiny ball of super-compressed air flew towards Sanji, but Sanji wasn't fooled by its size, and he wanted to dodge. But somehow, perhaps due to his barely-there Kenbunshoku, Sanji knew he couldn't escape the blast radius of whatever it was. Instead, he grimaced, grabbing his Haki with both mental hands and pulling it back around his body as one foot slammed into the ground so fast it caused sparks, a fire almost white-hot appearing around his foot. "Diable Jambe, Ifrit Flambe!" he bellowed, his kick flashing up into a roundhouse kick that caught the attack right before it would have impacted his chest.

"KRAAAAAAAAKKOOOOOOOOOOOM!"

There was fire, heat and Sanji disappeared in an explosion of tremendous proportions rocked the island portion of the massive ship, all of Thriller Bark heaving like a tugboat in a gale. And not incidentally hurling Sanji away before he was then overtaken by the rest of the blast radius. As the attack faded out, the damage done to the area Sanji had been standing in could be seen.

A crater almost the size of Oz had been gouged out of the ground, and a segment of the castle wall surrounding the island portion had been destroyed. Even as Kuma watched, segments of the island sloughed off down into the waters below.

This was nothing to the damage done to the forest, however. The explosion had caused what amounted to a forest fire, which was continuing to spread as Kuma watched. He could also see Hancock and Ranma near where the original shock wave had ended, and he frowned at the sight, somewhat annoyed his and Black Leg's attack had come back towards them so much.

Kuma paused for a moment, then turned back, staring down into the hole from where he stood at the edge of the crater. *That was rather more than I expected given the speed version Ursus Shock is noticeably weaker than the normal one. Black Leg's defense must have ignited the condensed air. Impressive.*

Satisfied the enemy pirate was dead, Kuma used his paws to bounce up into the air, heading towards the distant dots he could barely see thanks to his enhanced eyes as Hancock and Straw Hat. Fighting with one hand would be annoying, but overall, Kuma estimated he was around seventy percent effectiveness. With that in mind, there was no way he could just retreat, the World Government would become suspicious if he tried.

Kuma did slow however as he stared at the large figure moving to his south. A giant beyond any giant he had ever seen before. *That must be something that Moria has cooked up.* The giant in turn had paused, staring towards the explosion, but then it turned away, continuing on.

Because of this, he did not see Sanji punch upwards out of the loose soil near the edge of the crater opposite Kuma's former position. He had been hurled there when the explosion began, thankfully. If he hadn't, Sanji might not have survived.

The Straw Hat's chef slowly pulled his way out of the ground, then rolled to one side. His Busoshoku had failed but had lasted just long enough to save him while being at ground zero of the explosion. For a few moments, Sanji just lay there, then he reached inside his shirt. However, doing so was seemingly the last straw, and his shirt disintegrated, turning into so much ash that fluttered away on the wind. This revealed that his upper body was nothing more than a mass of bruises and burns right now. Indeed, his skin was so red it looked like he had been roasted over an open fire.

That burning had seared so many of Sanji's nerves that his pain receptors had just shut down, although that was actually a good thing given how horribly Sanji had wrecked his leg. Indeed, it was only thanks to Busoshoku that his leg was still there at all. But few of the bones within it from the hip down were in one piece.

More importantly to Sanji was that the carton of cigarettes he had pulled out also turned into ash, along with the cigarettes inside. "Well... fuck..." he grunted, then collapsed fully into unconsciousness.

OOOOOOO

As the massive giant Oz began to stir, Luffy was bending backward at the waist, dodging an attack, before kicking out hard, catching Boa in the chest with a Rankyaku and hurling her away. But Boa rode with the hit and kissed her fingers upon landing. As she flicked her hand to either side, large heart-shaped outlines of pink appeared in the air. One of them appeared right where Luffy was about to attack her from the side, where it exploded, turning everything around it into stone. "Heart Explosion!"

But Luffy was able to dodge just enough of the attack, landing with a hard elbow blow lancing down towards her head. She dodged around it, returning one of her own, and then a two-punch combo, both of her arms covered in Busoshoku, matching Luffy's own as they continued their fight, each blocked blow causing a sonic boom. Neither gave an inch until the shadow reformed, grabbing at Luffy's legs out of nowhere, hauling him down to the ground before suddenly releasing him and then racing away.

This still left Luffy off-balance, and again he had to dodge only to be blasted sideways from the Heart Explosion. Then, there was a rumbling sound in the distance, and the forest trembled from a blast of wind somewhere. Luffy barely noticed, being busy dodging a series of kicks and point-blank Pistol Kiss attacks.

A roar from the same direction the rumbling sound had come from however proved too much of a distraction. "I don't care what you say! I will be the greatest giant swordsman in the world!"

Both of them stared towards where they estimated the shout had come from, blinking, then looking at one another. "That almost sounded like something my first mate would say, although not exactly. The whole giant thing's new..." For a moment, the meaning behind that didn't register, and then Luffy's eyes narrowed dangerously as he started to expand his Kenbunshoku range. "How similar do zombies act to the shadows they've been fused with?"

"Am I supposed to know or care?" Boa scoffed, throwing her head back and once more looking down her nose at Luffy so much she was in fact staring up at the sky. "If your First Mate was so foolish as to let his shadow be taken, that is his business and yours, not mine."

With that, Hancock batted a tree trunk into the distracted Luffy's stomach, causing him to double over, Luffy having turned his attention to finding Zoro rather than his own surroundings. She brought her fists down on top of his head, but Luffy activated Busoshoku, and withstood the blow. A second later, Boa oofed as a fist lanced into her stomach, sending her stumbling backward. At the same time, a shadowy fist slammed into Luffy's knee just as he

bent his legs to hurl himself into the air, causing him to stumble sideways into a Heart Explosion, which turned half of his body into stone.

Breaking out using a flash of logia power, Luffy attempted to disengage. But Hancock used her Femur attack again, the trees around her becoming stone shrapnel smashing up and blasting Luffy out of the air.

At that point, the fight was once more interrupted as there was a sound that set both combatants' teeth on edge, causing them to wince and fall back from one another to turn to look back towards the mast-tower once more. This went on for some time, but eventually, both of them turned back to one another, shrugged, and then went back to attempting to kill one another.

Luffy raised his chin just slightly, avoiding a kick, and then danced around a second blow midair returning one that caught Hancock in the chest, followed by a chop to the side of her neck, which she blocked, returning one that nearly took Luffy in the chest. But he blocked it with a palm, although she twisted around and out of his attempt to grab at her hand, lashing out with a series of kicks that reminded Luffy of Sanji's anti-manner kick course.

Then, Luffy had to duck underneath an explosion, rolling away, kicking up and into the air, flipping himself and sending several Rankyaku towards Hancock, who blocked them, and then the two of them were engaged once more, all of their limbs glowing with Busoshoku. Luffy lashed out with several near point-blank railgun rounds, the rounds made of stone bits taken from the ground.

But somehow, Hancock could smack them aside with her Busoshoku arms and legs, then dodged through a series of Mini- Moko Takabisha blasts, lashing out with a kick, which forced Luffy to break off his attack to block it with his own Busoshoku imbued hand. But this time, he was able to close his grip before she could pull back and hurled her down into the forest below, smashing several trees into flinders.

An instant later, Boa pushed herself up, lashing out with Rankyaku and another Slave Arrow assault spreading them out so that Luffy had to be hit at least by some of them. Ducking down into the forest himself, Luffy shattered a tree into several bits, hurling them up and around to absorb both attacks before hopping up as fast as he could straight up into the air. Then he came down like an eagle crashing into Boa, sending her down to the earth where she rolled, getting in a few hard punches as Luffy did the same before they disengaged.

Staring across at her opponent, Hancock took stock of her body and reserves, somewhat stunned by how this fight had gone. She'd had all the information of Luffy's exploits up to this point. She had known he was a hellacious combatant. Yet fighting Luffy was beyond anything Boa had ever dealt with before. She knew that when it came to using Haki, she was one of the best among the warlords, and Boa had her Kuja training to infuse pure Haki into her attacks, which should have given her an edge.

But it hadn't, as Luffy seemed to just... ignore the added weight to her blows or block them with his own Busoshoku. *Worse, the longer this goes on, the more he adapts to my techniques, the more that forces me to modify them on the fly!*

The two of them continued to exchange blows and blasts, but then, from behind Hancock in the direction of the mast tower, another booming sound reached them, followed by a several small bits of debris flying through the battlefield, forcing them to separate as Ozoro launched his attack at the mainmast-tower.

Luffy scowled as he looked in that direction. "That almost sounded like Zoro again. I am seriously wondering what this giant zombie version of his looks like, but on the other hand, I suppose I should be thankful it hasn't interfered with our fight more."

Hancock grunted, rolling one shoulder caught by a piece of falling debris right before she had been able to cover herself Busoshoku. Unlike Luffy, she had no desire to push her Haki reserves by continuously covering her entire body in armor. Still, even without it, Boa was very durable, not quite as durable as Luffy seemed, but certainly more durable than any of the Straw Hats or Luffy's previous opponents. "So, Moria is doing something beyond sending that shadow against you, although I note it has since disappeared. I ..."

"Look out!" Luffy shouted, interrupting Boa as he saw the bloom of some kind of massive explosion to the side from the direction the fight had taken the two of them so far. *Shit, that's the direction Sanji and Kuma went!*

Luffy didn't know why he shouted a warning to his enemy. Perhaps a bit of Ranma's martial artist's sense of honor still remained in Luffy. Or perhaps, Hancock had impressed his subconscious enough that it acted without consulting the rest of him, unwilling to let anything sully the 'match.' Regardless, Hancock tensed, looking over her shoulder just as he shouted, and saw the last gasp of an explosion's shockwave coming towards her, smashing trees down and hurling them every which way.

Unlike the green energy attack Luffy had launched, this one was not just a wave of force, but also fire and she shrieked as it set her clothing on fire. It also turned the entire forest behind her into a huge conflagration, while the force of the explosion shattered the ground into a huge crater several stories deep but that fact was lost on her at present as the flame caught in her dress, setting it on fire.

Boa was barely able to keep it from doing the same to her hair by rolling in the dirt quickly, yet she knew that the back of her dress had been burned. *Damn it, what was that!? It started well beyond my Kenbunshoku range, and...* "It must be Kuma, curse him!"

Luffy was far enough away that he was able to just bounce through the air to get away from the debris of the explosion, and he looked at where the explosion had come from as Boa Hancock slowly pushed herself to her feet. "What the heck was that?" he muttered, before

glancing back at Hancock, his gaze was arrested by the tattoo on her back. "What's that mark..." Luffy began before trailing off as realization of what he was seeing hit him, his concern about Sanji shunted aside for the moment.. *That almost looks like a Celestial Dragon slave mark.*

Realizing what had happened Hancock flinched, then gritted her teeth before her brows furrowed in surprise as Luffy pulled off his shirt and tossed it down. She caught it and quickly pulled it on, turning away to preserve some of her modesty, although not in the manner that anyone else would. Instead, Boa tried to hide her back rather than her front from Luffy, although she noticed that he had already turned away, pulling a new shirt from somewhere and putting it on over his head.

"You have seen the mark of my shame," she growled, before visibly calming herself thanks to the strange act of chivalry from her opponent and when next she spoke, her question almost came out courteously. "Yet I notice you seem to have recognized the mark as well..."

Turning back to Hancock, Luffy nodded. "I have seen something like it before. On the back of a former Tenryubito (Celestial Dragon) slave." He watched as Boa flinched, far more at that than at most of the punches he'd landed so far this fight.

Seeing that, Luffy sighed, landing nearby, holding his hands up peaceably. "Er, look, I, I'm sorry I saw it, okay? But, um, a mark like that, however you got the original slave mark or changed it into that one, that's your secret. I ain't gonna er, look down on you or um, or hold it against you. And I sure as heck won't share it with anyone, that, that wouldn't be right. I promise, on my oath as a pirate captain." He suddenly smirked at her. "Doing that kind of thing would be really low, after you've given me such a great fight, after all."

At that, Boa stared up at Luffy, her eyes wide in surprise before she narrowed them, searching his face as best she could in the lights of the fires caused by whatever attack Kuma had just used. After a moment, her face softened, and she nodded. "I... I will take you at your word, Monkey D. Dragon. May Davy Jones claim you if you break it." Then Boa's lips quirked into an answering smirk. "Although you will forgive me for thinking it will become a moot point after I defeat you."

Luffy just nodded, then his expression turned somehow wry and somehow wolfish. "Or we could call the whole thing off? If you're an enemy of the Tenryubito, we really don't have **any** reason to keep fighting. In my mind, any enemy of that bunch of sorry sacks of crap-covered flesh is a good person. We could even make a vow to find their nearest holding, sac it together? That'd be fun."

Boa laughed shakily at that, but shook her head, taking some strength, strangely, by Luffy's rough understanding and his vow. "While I certainly loathe the Tenryubito and everything they stand for, I cannot become their enemy in such an open manner, if only because doing so would visit horror upon my people. Which would also occur if I simply walk away from a job specifically given to me by the World Government after agreeing to it as I did."

"And you're not willing to say it was impossible?" Luffy quipped.

But Boa simply shook her head, although the idea was tempting, and she answered far more completely than she would have otherwise. "No, because it isn't. My pride will not allow me to simply walk away, not when you cannot beat me alone and there are two other Shichibukai here. Regardless of my personal loathing for the shadow manipulator."

Luffy cracked his neck, then crouched down, his hands out to either side of him as he mentally put the revelation and the closeness it had created between them to one side. "Well, you know what they say about pride going before a fall. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Hancock simply shook her head, not replying in any other manner. While she was pleased that Luffy wasn't judging her for being a slave and his vow, which she sensed he had given willingly, that changed nothing of their present circumstances. *I wish it could, which is astonishing on its own, as is my belief that Luffy will actually keep that vow if he somehow survives our confrontation. But I have my obligation to my people, and I will not let them be targeted for my weakness, as they surely would without the protection of my position as a Shichibukai.*

With a sigh, Boa crouched down, her hands in front of her, a Pistol Kiss lanced towards Luffy, who ducked to one side before charging forward. Boa moved to meet him, although now, there weren't any scowls of fury or anger on either of their faces. What little anger or animosity had been between them was gone. Luffy would keep fighting because Hancock was a threat to his crew and himself. But he knew it wasn't personal. Likewise, Hancock had come to respect Luffy and even acknowledge his skills and abilities. And now he had seen Boa's most private secret and not only vowed to keep it but had also shown no contempt or even false sympathy. In a way, it was almost refreshing to have someone see her secret and not care one way or another.

And yet, Boa still had a duty to as a Shichibukai to uphold. *I've made an agreement with the World Government. I must see it through,* she repeated.

For several more minutes, the two of them exchanged blows, but then, from the direction of the explosion, Kuma arrived. And even before he touched down nearby, both Luffy and Boa knew he'd been put through the wringer.

One of his legs was hanging almost limp in the air. Luffy saw the Bible which had been on Kuma's belt was gone along with large segments of his clothing. This showed that portions of his body had been seared by flames. Indeed, it looked as if Kuma's skin had been blasted off in segments, allowing the metal underneath to be seen.

Coupled with the massive attack earlier both Boa and Luffy knew what his arrival signified though, and Boa found herself backing away, giving Luffy some time to process it. From nearby, she watched as his eyes turned distant and his face slack in a way that almost

disturbed her, although she had expected the lack of attention, which was the obvious sign of someone using Kenbunshoku. *I could attack him now, overwhelm him with Kuma but I will not. Such would not be honorable, and he has earned my respect that far at least. And that face... it looks so... so wrong on Luffy...*

After a moment, Luffy ended the Soul of Ice he had almost automatically called upon when Kuma appeared, shutting out his anger and grief at what Kuma's arrival could have meant. But the emotional damage using the Soul of Ice was too much to use unless facing someone like Aokiji, and it wasn't necessary now. *Sanji's alive. Heck, I think I felt him moving around, the tough bastard! Hell yeah, underestimate my crew at your peril you bear-bastard!*

"Well, from what I can sense, Sanji's alive, so I'm not going to go full rage monster on ya just yet. I can also see my guess was right. You really are a cyborg. Guess that explains why you're so quick to obey the World Government. Tell me, which came first, you being a cyborg, or you agreeing to be their bum-bitch?" he questioned, unknowingly repeating the earlier taunts Sanji had used even as he prepared to take this fight to a whole new level of violence. *Time to see if this asshole can bounce vorpel blades.*

For his part, Kuma had paused, wondering why Hancock was wearing Straw Hat's shirt. And, moreover, where Straw Hat had gotten a new shirt at all. But now he shook off that minor mystery as he answered Luffy's taunt. He was more than willing to trade words right now, having been pushed hard by Black Leg. Even repelling his pain earlier, a process that had taken some time, did not mean he wanted to start the hostilities up once more right away given how that technique did not actually heal his cyborg parts. "Your prevarications will not work on me, as Black Leg's did not. Your crew has been decimated, whatever you might believe. Surrender. Your head alone will..."

Luffy didn't let him finish speaking. Blitzing towards the other man, he dodged between Kuma's palm strikes, and then lashing out with a punch that almost dislocated the man's jaw, smashing several of his teeth out and causing some kind of damage that caused a series of sparks to escape from Kuma's mouth. "How about no?" Luffy drawled.

"Excellent, excellent, this has been a most fascinating day!" shouted a new voice, causing Luffy to realize that he hadn't seen Moria's shadow since the explosion.

The fire from the explosion had dissipated Moria's shadow, and it had taken some time to reform. But once it had done so behind Ranma, Gecko suddenly shifted into his shadow as his shadow changed shape, launching a fist towards Luffy from the side. Luffy twirled but was too slow, and a punch that felt like it came from a giant crashed into his side and shoulder, hurling him away.

"Moria, you look different," Hancock mused, as she spread out to one side, catching Luffy between them. "Almost as if you have been taking those odd drugs that come out of West Blue occasionally."

This was quite true. Luffy had noticed during the battle that Gecko's shadow had grown as the fight went on. But now he saw that Gecko too had grown to at least twice his normal height. He now towered over even Kuma, let alone Luffy and Hancock. His arms and legs were also distended, much more powerful looking than before.

"Kishishishishi, that is my little secret, my dear, although I could say the same about you. I wonder what happened to have you wear the shirt that Straw Hat was wearing earlier, hmm?"

"Tsk... ask Kuma," Boa growled, pointing towards her fellow Shichibukai. "He used some kind of explosive attack against Black Leg, and the edge of it caught my dress on fire." So much of the back of her dress was gone that she could feel the front of it flapping barely kept in place by the bits over her shoulders and upper arms within the shirt Luffy had tossed her.

Regardless, she had to come up with a lie about why he had done so, and came up with one quickly. "Lu... Straw Hat tossed me his shirt worried that seeing more of my skin would make my Mero Mero powers more effective against him."

"Hmm..." Moria wondered if there was more than that going on, but he honestly didn't care. "Well, regardless, his crew has been taken care of thanks to your crew and Perona, Hancock. You held Straw Hat here, and your Amazons completely overwhelmed the majority of his crew with my Ghost Princess's help," he announced, lying through his teeth before spinning a tale for both Hancock and Straw Hat. *If he could really sense the blonde one is still alive, I can't take chances that he might be able to sense the Amazons. Not when I am so close to total victory here!*

Although he was often lazy and overconfident, Gecko Moria was a New World veteran who had been bitten in the ass by his arrogance several times before. And trickery and lies were his stock in trade. So, the tale he spun actually made some sense. "They took some losses and have retreated back out beyond Thriller Bark. For some reason, they don't seem to trust any aid my zombies could give. Although they did help us against some of the rats aboard my ship, refugees whose shadows I have long since taken but who acted out now in the foolish belief in these Straw Hats Kishishishishi!"

Hearing that Hancock scowled, tempted to use Kenbunshoku to search for her crewmen, but she knew that with the size of Thriller Bark, she would not be able to sense them at this distance. Indeed, she could barely reach back to where the mansion had once stood before Luffy had destroyed it, which was barely a quarter of the distance to the artificial inlet where the Straw Hats' ship had been.

On the other hand, Luffy had no such shortcoming, and as the two Shichibukai talked Luffy had allowed his Kenbunshoku to expand, then expand some more, well beyond the radius Hancock could see. So it was that he felt the unconscious minds of Makino, Nami, Franky and Laki alongside a lot of other minds whose owners he didn't know well enough to identify. He also felt Chopper, frantic, awake but unmoving, captured. But Zoro was nearby, moving in the

doctor's direction. And as he did so, he sensed Sanji coming awake from having been unconscious since Luffy's last attempt to sense him. He was moving slowly, but was alive.

Yet the bad clearly outweighed the good, and Luffy felt guilt welling up inside him as he realized that indeed, his crew had been mauled in this battle, just like Kuma had said. "I see. So, once again, down to me against you three, and my crew has already paid the price for this madness of the WeeGee..." he shook his head and then got into a stance, one fist thrust forward, the other one in a palm behind his head. "And for me holding back."

Moria cackled, shaking his head. "Kishishishishi! Your shadow will be truly magnificent! But do you really think after having fought for more than an hour and now faced with not two but three Shichibukai, you can..."

"Yes I can," Luffy interrupted him, thrusting out his hand, which began to change into lightning. All three Shichibukai stared in shock before a blast of lightning crossed towards where Moria was standing. So surprised was Moria that he could only barely use his shadow as a shield instead of trying to dodge or shadow walk. But the impact of the lightning against the shadow caused both shadow and man to scream in pain, although it didn't seem to actually do any physical damage to Moria, while his shadow once more came apart and showed no sign of reforming anytime soon.

"Because I'm no longer holding back!" Luffy roared as his body slowly started to change into lightning. "And none of you are getting out of here alive!"

End Chapter

I tried to make the fights as chaotic as possible simply because I believed that everyone's disparate skills and abilities would make it such.

Regardless, Hancock's Amazons are now captive, and she doesn't know it. Kumashi, Perona, and several other zombies are still around the place, and Zoro is still without his swords, although awake and searching for them in his own fashion. Where will it all go from here? Only thing I know is lightning starts to crash...