

I can't draw, nor am I Japanese.

Hey all. Sorry, this is out so late in the month, but RL happened to my primary One Piece editor, and it took him a while to get the chapter back to me. However, it has been edited by Tomon, Hiryo, and me via Grammarly. I know I didn't get to the whole chapter with Grammarly, but hopefully, we caught enough small mistakes so that your enjoyment of the chapter doesn't suffer.

The next chapter of ATP for here on fanfic has been sent back to me by Observanc3. I will be going through it and posting it tomorrow. If you don't want to wait a day, you can see it, the next chapter and a lot more you-know-where. To make up for this I will be posting a chapter from one of my other works as well.

Chapter 34: Planning Ahead!?

The marine frigate moved through the waves like the swift, fearless predator it was, the flags of the marines waving above them. Currently, the ship's captain standing by the prow, staring ahead, although here in the Florian Triangle, there wasn't much to see thanks to the ever-present fog. The ship had been moving through the fog using a combination of a Log Pose and Eternal Pose to canvas the entire area, but they hadn't seen anything of *Thriller Bark*, no sign whatsoever.

"Are we sure this is the center of the Florian Triangle?" Captain Hardy demanded, pulling at one of his long mustaches in irritation.

"Sir. I'm about as certain as anyone can be," his navigator answered, standing beside him. "Mapping anything on the Grand Line exactly isn't easy, but we know the overall size and shape of the Florian Triangle thanks to the fog. Beyond that..." he shrugged.

The captain grumbled, but then one of the lookouts shouted for his attention. "Sirs, there's something out there, something floating to the starboard. Distance is impossible to determine, but it's about at the edge of my eyesight in this muck. Apologies for the poor report, sirs!"

Running in that direction, Hardy pulled out his spyglass and peered through the fog before shaking his head. "I can't see it! Lower the boat. Boatswain, prepare a crew. First Mate, get a bullhorn up to the lookout. He'll need to give us directions."

His men leaped to obey, and moments later, the ship's boat was lowered over the side. The captain hopped down into it personally along with the crew. Eventually, they found the bit of flotsam that the lookout had somehow seen. "Remind me to praise that man when I get

back," Hardy muttered to the chief boatswain of the crew. "He must have the eyes of an eagle to see this far in this muck."

The man nodded as two of the sailors pulled the bit of flotsam up the boat, and the captain inspected it, frowning. "This looks like the outer wall of some kind of keep rather than a ship. Which probably means it's part of Thriller Bark."

Once back aboard the frigate, Hardy barked out orders quickly. The frigate moved in the direction that the flotsam had been floating in, circling around, and soon they were finding other bits. With twelve new bits of flotsam to examine, Hardy had seen enough to understand that whatever had happened here. Getting on the snail phone, he called the number he had been given, reporting straight to Tsuru.

That made him a little nervous. A lowly frigate captain - a commander really, but the master after god aboard the ship was always called captain - would rarely report directly to someone of Tsuru's lofty rank. But that had been his orders.

"A, Admiral, we've arrived at what we **think** is the position of *Thriller Bark*. I say think because there isn't really anything left here. We found a lot of jetsam, enough to tell me that something big was here, and all of it appears to have come from the same vessel, given its coloration and size. But there's no sign of what occurred beyond that. Given the size of one bit we've found, I have to assume the rest to have come from *Thriller Bark*'s outer wall-hull-thing. If we need to find anything more, we'd probably have to bring in specialized diving equipment."

OOOOOOO

In her office, Tsuru was silent for a few seconds. Finally, she spoke. "Continue your search around the area for the rest of the day. I want..."

She was interrupted by a shout coming through from the other side of the Mushi. "Captain! There's something out there in the fog, some large AGGGHGH!"

The voice ended in a scream, and Tsuru looked at the Den Den Mushi in shock as it was followed by shrieks and shouts as the commander tried to bellow orders before the call cut off very abruptly. Tsuru stared down at it in consternation, then sighed. "The Florian Triangle has been a land of mystery for longer than since Moria began using it as a base of operations. Blast it. I suppose I will have to call for..."

"OYYYY!" Tsuru nearly jumped as her door banged open and Garp appeared there, holding a box of senbei crackers and a cup of tea. "Yo, ya old hag, ya hungry? Sengoku kicked me out, but I have all these crackers to finish."

Sighing, Tsuru put her annoyances with not knowing what had happened to the Straw Hats to one side. It seemed like she'd have to wait a bit to follow up on that.

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"FOOOD!" Was the bellowing cry that rose around the green-haired mermaid Camie as she looked around, finding herself on the deck of a ship. It seemed somewhat crowded and had several large turrets with big, dangerous-looking guns, and the crew seemed to be a very eclectic group, but the shout of 'food' drowned any curiosity she might have felt. Staring at the men and a few women around her, Camie hunched down, flapping her long tail in front of her face as she waved her hands wildly. "Please don't eat me!"

The cheering and shouting around her paused as the men there became aware they had a mermaid, an object of desire throughout the seas, amongst them. Then they began cheering for another reason altogether, and one of the men winked at her, attempting to be charming. But given the look in his eyes, he came off or is a lech than anything else. This was not helped by several of the men around her suddenly realizing they had a real mermaid in their midst and began to look at her, their eyes turning into hearts. "Don't worry, darling. While you look tasty, you certainly don't look edible."

That comment went right over Camie's head, but Robin heard it. Crossing her arms, she created a hand on the man's shoulder, smacking him upside the head several times. "None of that. The girl looks scared enough as it is without needing to deal with perverts."

"GAH! A hand from nowhere!" Camie shouted.

"Do not worry about that, madame. Robin is harmless. Well, mostly harmless," Brook announced, moving through the crowd and bowing from the waist. "Yohohoho, it is a delight for a musician such as me to meet a siren of the sea."

Camie's face, which had already been a parody of shock, became even more so now. Her tongue stuck out, her eyes widening in shock as her skin paled dramatically. "Ahhh, talking skeleton!"

"Indeed I am, and I can even do this, Yohohoho," Brook bowed as he pulled at his afro, opening his skull up to show the interior. "But could you grace us with your name, madame?"

"Oh, wow, that's cool." Camie provided, "Ah, and I'm Camie."

"Mellorine, Mellorine!" Sanji shouted, dancing into the group and kicking all of the men around Camie away, including Brook, while leaving the Kuja where they were. With the riffraff done with, Sanji bowed grandly to Camie, holding out his hand. "Welcome aboard the ship, oh beauteous treasure of the ocean. Please let me know if you require anything. This humble cook will make it his life's work to fulfill whatever charge you place on him."

Grumbling at this, Marguerite scowled and found herself stepping on the cook's foot for some reason she couldn't quite understand. At the same time, Aphelandra elbowed him in the

back of the head, also looking somewhat uncertain as to why she had felt the need to do so but not fighting it even as she spoke, her voice showing her uncertainty. "Darn it, don't just go and, and do whatever it is you're doing that annoys me! Why did I feel jealous just now?"

Franky snickered as Sanji tried to stammer out an explanation (or defense, it was unclear which). "Cook-aniki, you'd think a guy with a flower on either arm would know not to reach for a third. Even if she is a mermaid and mermaids are a man's romance!"

"Besides, don't you have some work you should get back to?" Luffy quipped, tossing up a penny in one hand and looking at his cook meaningfully.

Sanji took the cue and rushed over to the ship's side as the corpse of the giant Sea King was hauled back to the ship, at which point he went to work quickly, shouting orders both to Zoro and to his helpers. While his two helpers leaped to obey, Zoro did not, arguing back angrily at being ordered about until Luffy got involved, growling out, "Just do it! The sooner it's done, the sooner we can eat our fill."

That roused another cheer from the combined crews while Camie looked around her in some confusion as most of the crew seemed to turn their attention to the Sea King now instead of her. A soft hand on Camie's shoulder caused her to turn, and the woman from before nodded her head over to an area past the large structure at the center of the ship, the likes of which Camie had never seen before.

There, she could see trees laid out in small rows. They looked as if they were planted in the deck, but that was impossible, right? "If you would like to sit with myself and some of the other ladies, you can tell us your story, Mermaid-chan. How did you actually come to be in some monster's stomach? And what is your name."

"Oh, um..." While Camie was happy the older-looking human woman was being nice to her, the whole hand thing from before was throwing her off. As were the people around them, several of whom had started to cheer once more at the sight of the fish being carved into pieces.

She hesitated too long for the woman, apparently, and a second later, Camie screamed as she found herself being lifted up, feet appearing from below. A moment later, the feet were carrying her after the older woman. They were soon joined by a few others, including one older woman, whose beauty caused Camie to be self-conscious, something she wasn't used to feeling towards humans.

"A mermaid, hmm? If you wanted more proof that we were close to mermaid island, that is it," that woman muttered. "That is good. Hopefully, that also means that we are also close to the Archipelago."

"Ah, hai, you're only a few days away, if that," Camie stammered, getting control of herself and bowing from the waist as she was deposited in front of the other women. "Hello, I'm Camie!"

"I'm Nami, this is Robin, and that over there is Hancock. You'll meet the others later. Welcome aboard the Straw Hats pirate ship."

"Thank you for saving me. I... wait, pirates, pirates! Ahh, I'm in trouble again!" Camie wailed, looking like she was about to crawl away.

"Don't worry about that. We're probably not like any pirates you've ever met. And given the fact that you brought some food with you, everyone aboard the ship will treat you like you're the best thing to happen to us for a while, which you are," Nami answered with a laugh.

"So this is a mermaid. Wow, I've never seen one before," Luffy said, coming over and waving Zoro to join him, although he paused, reaching to the side to pick up a large starfish from where it had gone splat against the wood of the deck.

"Still, I suppose the rumors are true about how cute they are," Zoro murmured, looking at the girl, causing the nearby Perona to huff in annoyance.

Laki spoke up then, slumping onto her rear beside Nami. "Actually, we have met a mermaid before. You remember Kokoro-baa-san? She was a mermaid too,"

Luffy blinked, then imagined the old woman he had met at the train station and again a few times in Water 7. She had shown up occasionally to talk to Franky and Iceburg. He tried to imagine the old woman as a mermaid, then shook his head rapidly, flopping down to sit in the grass around the trees next to Laki, poking her in the shoulder in some annoyance. "Keep that kind of horror to yourself! Besides, I never saw her transform, so Camie still counts as the first mermaid I've seen."

"Agreed," Zoro and Sanji both announced, Sanji coming close enough to hear Laki's pronouncement. Neither of them was doing as good a job as Luffy had at banishing the mental image they had suddenly come up with, and it was so horrifying that they didn't notice they had agreed with one another and didn't bother arguing about it.

"But anyway, what's this little creature?" Luffy went on, holding out the starfish in one hand.

Camie clapped in delight, reaching out for the starfish. "Oh, this is my pet, Master Pappag."

"Er...what?" everyone asked, looking very confused bar Sanji, who was racing down into the kitchen with a tray of fish meat.

"Hai, he's my pet and my teacher when it comes to designing clothes. This is a shirt he designed," Camie said, tugging at her shirt.

Lola huffed. Having another pretty girl around was not her idea of fun, but she couldn't deny the shirt looked nice. "That's a good design, I guess."

"Hai, Pappag is the chief designer and manager of the Criminal Fashion line!" Camie went on while the starfish started to rouse in her arms.

"Huh, I've actually heard of that line," Perona mused, looking at the little starfish with interest. "And you know, many of us, not just the girls, but most men aboard this ship and the Moria Victims Alliance, could do with some new clothing..."

"Eh, eh, Camie, where are, were we rescued again? Great... wait, that's a pirate flag, AGGGG!" Pappag had woken up and found his eyes caught by the fluttering black flag high above from the side of the main 'mast.'

"Oh, don't worry, they're nice," Camie smiled, letting the starfish creature go.

Pappag landed on two of his points, obviously his feet, before hopping up and smacking Camie lightly on the side of the head. There seemed to be a lot of that going around, Hancock noted, feeling somewhat left out, wondering if she should smack one of her own crew for some reason. "You idiot, you can't just trust them like that. They could be lying!"

"Oh my god, you're right!" Camie shouted, her mouth dropping open, her eyes growing wide.

"If I tried to do anything to you, I'd have a small civil war on my hands," Luffy snickered, a response answered with a shout from many of the MVA men and Sanji, who had just brought out the first large tray of prepared food. Then he cocked his head. "Also, 'again'?"

"Indeed, Camie-chwan! I would never let any of these bastards harm a hair on your head. Now, ladies..." Sanji was interrupted by several MVA, and Luffy shouted 'food' and rushed him. "Gah, back off, you bastards!" He shouted, kicking out and sending bodies left and right, only Luffy blocking his kick. The next second, Luffy ducked under another kick, grabbing up a slice of fish steak and a plate.

His just due as captain secured, Luffy hopped away to sit on the railing nearby, letting a somewhat annoyed Sanji continue to serve the girls. Behind him, Aphelandra came out of the kitchen, her arms spread wide, balancing several other equally large plates. "Don't rush me, you lot, or I'll send you into the drink!" the large Kuja with the childish face shouted before letting Marigold and Sonia take a few of the plates. She was followed by Margarete with still more.

"Oh wow, this all looks good!" Camie exclaimed before taking a bite. "OH my god, it is soooo good! Just like Hatchan's Takoyaki!"

"Mmm, I quite agree, cook-san," Hancock murmured. "Whatever kind of glaze you put on this is truly amazing. I don't suppose you've taught it to our cooks, have you?"

"This is pure happiness!" Sanji exclaimed, his one visible eye a heart as he danced around the deck.

"OY, you asshole, what about us!?" Came the shout from the attached ship.

"Ladies first, you bastards, all of them! You lot will have the dregs and like it!" Sanji shouted back, huffing irritably before turning to the filleted fish and carving up some more bits to take inside. "Hmm... Franky, how quickly could you whip up a floating grill?"

While Franky and Sanji were talking, Luffy had turned back to the mermaid. "So, what are you doing out here all alone? And what's up with 'again'?" he repeated.

"Oh, um hehehe, I just like to explore. And since I'm a mermaid, if I see trouble coming, I can swim away from it," Camie explained.

"Oy, Camie, don't get too friendly with... mmm, that is good!" Pappag muttered before deciding to give the pirates the benefit of the doubt. Indeed, the idea of eating the Sea King, who had come so close to eating him and Camie, made him quite happy. "Er, yeah, Camie's a mermaid, which means she's one of the fastest things in the ocean."

"Yep! It's just, most of the time, I have trouble noticing danger until I've already been eaten, teehee," Camie smiled self-deprecatingly.

"I rather doubt that is something you should be happy about," Makino stated, sweatdropping. Her jaw wasn't up for much talking, but she couldn't let that pass by.

Then all of the trio of crews were too busy eating to talk much. Unfortunately, this caused further issues a moment later. "Oy, Chopper, we've got some people over here with stomach issues!"

Chopper looked up from the shout from the other vessel and scowled, hopping to his feet after carefully putting a small towel over his work. *Use me as bait, will you!? I might not have a needle that could get through your skin without you letting it, but I'm a doctor, which means I've got a big bag of tricks. My super-laxative will be ready soon, and then you better watch what you eat!*

"What are the symptoms?" He asked, ignoring the two newcomers' shouts of 'the reindeer talked' for a second before twisting around and staring at them. "Wait, you know I'm a

reindeer! How can a starfish and a mermaid pick that out when so many other people have trouble?!"

"It's still talking!" Camie shouted, looking shocked once more.

"That's right, Chopper ate the human fruit. He's our doctor," Laki explained, watching Chopper turn away, and hop into the air towards the other ship, still in his small forward for the moment. A moment later, all of them heard him shouting, "You idiots! You can't just go and stuff your faces as much as you want after being on quarter rations for so long! Especially for you Moria Victims Alliance folk!"

"Huh, why'd he say that we've been on quarter rations? We've been on, what, sixths rations or worse, right?" Luffy muttered.

"Quarter rations roll off the tongue easier," Hancock answered with a snicker.

At the same time, Chopper bellowed again, the first sentence not reaching them but the second coming across almost clearly. "...precious stomach pump when I can just use my fists! Therapy for me and medical operation for you in one!"

Nearby, Laki sighed, leaning against one of the trees, letting her feet stick out beyond the tree's shadow. Food or not, she was glad to be outside on a nice day. She had been the slowest to heal, with Makino's injuries healing better than her own given the nature of Laki's wounds. *And I could have done without the surprise of finding myself sharing the med-room with so many Kuja.*

Staring around her at her crew, their allies and their hangers-on, which was how many of the crew felt about the Victims Alliance, Laki scowled, remembering the fight once more and how it had only been Nami, Makino and their sudden arrival which had saved her. She reached down, patting her thigh for a moment. *Not again. I'm not going to be taken out of the battle again. I'll need to rebuild my rifle too.*

She had questioned Eve about it and found her rifle had been kicked overboard. The Klabautermann hadn't been able to grab it before the rifle had disappeared into the ocean. She still had a few dials fit for hand-held weapons left, but the rifle had used up a lot, especially after the remainder had been used around the new ship and the finished version of Nami's weapons. *Hmmm... maybe go for a regular Blue Sea rifle and then concentrate on using dials in defense? Along with more training from Luffy, anyway.*

Makino was also taking the effect of finally having a full stomach to recall how the last battle had gone. *I, I was wrong. I cannot get by simply moving forward placidly, assuming that I am at the pinnacle of my combat skills. Staying as I am is not an option going forward. Not if I want to reach Shanks. He's a Yonko, you stupid girl! Whatever happens after that, I need to get stronger.*

So as the others sat around talking and eating in delight, Makino and Laki both made a vow, one they would see fulfilled, if in very different ways. *I need to get stronger!*

They were brought back to the rest of the conversation as Pappag began to whine. "Please, just one outfit?! Do you know how much publicity I could make by a single picture of the Pirate Empress wearing my designs?!"

"No means no, small creature!" Boa Hancock bellowed, shaking her head, pointing at Pappag haughtily. "I have no need of new clothing. Even if I did, I would go to my Kuja sisters, not an outsider."

The starfish creature slumped forward, which Camie ignored, busy answering questions from Nami on what she had said previously about being attacked so often. "Yeah, I'm kind of clumsy and unlucky, so I get eaten a lot. I'm usually saved by one of my friends, a merman named Hatchan. He's super-strong. Up to this point, he's saved me thirty times, ten from being eaten, and twenty times from being kidnapped by slavers."

Luffy's narrowed dangerously at the mention of slavers, as did several of the others, the Boa sisters among them. However, Nami was staring at Camie for an entirely different reason, her own eyes wide in wild surmise. But before she could say anything, Camie had gone on, smiling happily. "Wait a minute, I bet he would love to cook some Takoyaki for you all as thanks for saving me. Let me call him."

The rest of the crew nearby watched as Camie opened her backpack, which looked like a large clam and pulled out a Den Den Mushi. She spoke into it, her voice even more upbeat than before when talking to the crew. "Hatchan! This is Camie. I got eaten again, teehee! But you don't need to worry, I was already rescued by some pirates. They are funny and have this nifty pirate flag with a straw hat and..."

"HOHOHO!" a voice replied, but it wasn't Camie's friend judging by her suddenly wide eyes. "Sorry to say, Camie-chan, but we've captured your friend Hachi."

"EEEEHHHHH...., who are you?" Camie inquired, going from horrified to quizzical in a split second, her shocked expression fading into simply confused.

"Gah! That hurts, you know! We've only captured you twenty times before this! How can you not recognize my voice? This is Macro, Macro of the Macro pirates! Anyway, we've captured your friend here, and unless you want us to turn him into his product, you'll do precisely what we say, yeah?"

"How the heck did you three ignoramuses ever beat Hachi?" snorted Pappag, showing that he at least recognized who they were talking to. "I bet you just stole his Den Den Mushi and ran off before he could kick your asses like usual."

"Oh? Well, maybe you will believe this then?" There was a sound of someone being hit, a sound everyone aboard the ship knew very well, and then a second voice answered, sounding like its owner was in pain. Despite that, the voice almost sounded familiar to Luffy. Like he'd heard it before, but only a few times, maybe? Zoro and Sanji looked confused, staring at the phone, although Nami's eyes had become thin slits of growing anger, evidently having recognized the voice and not liking that one bit.

"C, Camie? Don't come, stay away... was followed by another sound of someone being heard, and the same voice came back online.

"Well, as you can see, we did capture your friend. Proof enough?"

"Ugh, bu, but how!?" Camie stammered in shock.

Another voice cut in, sounding somewhat dumber than the first, although Luffy would have thought that was impossible. "We have new allies, new friends, you should say, the flying fish riders."

"Gah, damn it, Tansui, don't be so free with our secrets, you idiot!" Macro bellowed.

Suddenly the sounds of a small scuffle could be heard, the previous two voices arguing back and forth. However, this was interrupted by another sound, a dull clonking thud.

"Ah, the sound of two skulls being brought together," Luffy nodded sagely. Everyone else stared at him, and he shrugged, although he was frowning as the Hatchan voice came back for a second, pleading for Camie to stay away before being silenced. "The bandits that raised me routinely smack Ace, Sabo and my heads together. It's a kind of distinctive sound, you know."

The meeting of the skulls seemed to have worked to restore order, and soon another voice spoke, somewhat tinny and more than a bit manic. "That's right, that's right, the Flying Fish Riders have moved into the area, mermaid. And if you don't want us to draw and quarter your friend, you will come to us. Bring your new friends too, the Straw Hats, right? We're just dying to meet you."

"My word, could he count at spoken more like a generic evil villain if he tried? Robin murmured, although she was frowning at Luffy, reaching over to gently squeeze his bicep. "What's wrong?"

Luffy shook his head, looking between Nami and the phone, while the rest of the crew watched in some confusion as Nami began to pace around her trees, growling under her breath. But neither of them spoke as this new voice went on, becoming louder and even crazier sounding. "Especially you, Black Leg! You and me, you and me, we, we have a score to settle! A score to settle for your ruining my life!"

With that, the Den Den Mushi call ended, and everyone around them looked at Sanji now, with Brook chuckling as he put their thoughts into words. "Yohohoho, is there something you want to share with us, Sanji-san?"

"I've never heard that voice before. Admittedly, my memory for male voices isn't the best, but I can't imagine what I could have done to wreck someone's life."

"Feh, maybe something from back before you joined us? You were kind of an ass at that Baratie of yours," Zoro taunted, pulling his lips away from a mug of ale with some reluctance. The crew had been allowed sake for a while, simply because if you couldn't put food in your stomach, putting alcohol in there wasn't exactly a good idea.

Sanji was about to shout at him, but he paused, looking thoughtful. "Well, actually, there were a lot of people I kicked back then. Bad waiters, horrible cooks, men on dates with good-looking ladies..."

Margarete and Aphelandra both scowled, looking at one another. "Why the heck does that make me jealous again?" Aphelandra whispered, to which Margarete had no answer.

"More importantly, what was the name of your friend again?" Nami asked intently.

Camie looked up from where she and Pappag had been arguing, her eyes wide with sudden hope. "Hatchan!"

Nearby Zoro murmured. "That name, that name sounds familiar..."

"T, this Hatchan isn't an octopus merman, is he?" Nami asked, dreading the answer.

Hearing that, Camie breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, are you friends of his? Oh, thank goodness, that means you'll help me save him, right? Hatchan told me he worked as a pirate for a bit, but now, he's following his childhood dream of becoming one of the greatest Takoyaki makers in the world."

"We're not his friends!" Zoro growled, his face shifting into a grimace, causing Camie and Pappag to twitch back in fear, clinging to one another.

Ignoring them, Luffy looked over at Nami, although despite the anger he was feeling, he had to smirk as Hancock murmured, "Wait, an octopus merman making Takoyaki? That is either cannibalism or the equivalent of a human being wishing to become famous for his monkey dishes."

Setting that moment of humor aside, Luffy looked back at Nami solicitously. "You okay, Nami?"

Nami scowled, looking at Luffy, then Zoro. But then she sighed, shaking her head. "I suppose I'm okay. If any of them had to survive, I guess he was the best choice. He never, you know, tortured me or anything."

"I'm sorry, what?" Robin asked in sudden alarm, with Brook, Franky, and Chopper all echoing the question.

"Nami, what do you want us to say here?" Luffy placed a hand on Nami's shoulder. "We won't say anything if you don't want us to."

She sighed and waved one hand, indicating someone Luffy could explain. Looking around at the others, particularly Hancock and Camie, Luffy began. "Have you ever heard of the Arlong pirates?"

Hancock frowned thoughtfully, then nodded. "Actually, I remember meeting Arlong once. He was not a captain at the time, nearly part of Fisher Tiger's crew. I know he broke off to form his own crew, but I don't know any more than that."

"Well, the asshole came to East Blue and made some kind of deal with the local marines. With that and his own strength, he was able to conquer an island. Nami's Island. And when he found out about her cartography skills, he put them to use, made her one of his 'crew' and used her as a slave, making him more and more maps. Hachi was one of his officers."

As Camie stared in shock. Hancock looked over at the orange-haired girl, nodding her head in commiseration and understanding. "I see. And you freed yourself or..."

"My crewmates freed me!" Nami laughed wryly, remembering how she had broken down and asked Luffy to help her. She put an arm over Sanji and Luffy's shoulders, smiling at Hancock, while one eye flicked toward Camie, wondering how she was taking this. "Freed me, freed my island, killed Arlong. We also thought we had killed most of his officers, but..."

"Yes, isn't it funny that your opponent was the only one to live, Zoro?" Sanji asked, blowing a smoke ring towards Marimo with a snort, forgetting that they were talking about Camie-chwan's friends. "How weak are you, huh?"

Nami moved away quickly as Zoro leaped to his feet, roaring. "I was injured by Hawk Eyes at the time, and I still finished my opponent faster than you did, Aho-cook! Besides, the marines should have taken him and any of the others prisoner, eventually. Blame the marines' incompetence, not me."

"Bu, bu, s, so does that mean you won't help Hatchan?" Camie stammered, her bottom lip trembling, her eyes huge as she stared around her at the Straw Hats.

"It's up to Nami-san, my dear. I apologize, but after hearing that tale, even if you were willing to show me your panties, I would not try to overrule our navigator on this," Brook answered, bowing floridly towards the

"Panties? Oh, mermaids don't wear any," Camie giggled, momentarily forgetting her concern for Hachi or the Straw Hat's response to him. "Heck, most of us don't even need bras, just swimsuits since our backs are naturally so strong and our chests firm. Look." Using her tail, she shifted in place, going up and down right in Brook's face, her breasts bouncing under her shirt. Although, admittedly, not as much as a human woman would have. "See, not a lot of bounce, right?"

Brook nearly exploded backward due to the power of his nosebleed, while Sanji's eyes bulged, as did many of the men nearby from the Victim's Alliance, staring in shock from where they were sitting well out of hearing range. Franky also had a nosebleed and gave the green-haired mermaid a thumb's up. "Nice!"

"Ahem, if we could get back on track?" Robin coughed delicately, rolling her eyes, while most of the women around Camie shared the thought, *What an airhead*. "What do you want us to do, Nami?"

"Right, well, um, despite being part of Arlong's crew, Hachi wasn't a bad guy. He was never one who, you know, tortured me or anything. Heck, sometimes when he was the only one around, he was nice to me. He always gave me the impression of a kid who had run after his older brothers, getting into trouble besides them without really understanding why it was wrong."

Camie breathed a sigh of relief, then looked over the others. "So, so does this mean you'll rescue him?"

Luffy sighed. "I suppose so,"

"Takoyaki does sound good," Hancock mused, then snorted as everyone looked at her. "One must always have one's priorities straight, after all."

Luffy and everyone else laughed, although many of the Victims Alliance and Kuja nodded in firm agreement. Half of the fish was already gone to feed their stomachs. But eating something different other than fish would also be really nice at the moment.

"That's all well and good, but how will we find these Flying Fish Riders?" Franky questioned, getting nods from Marigold and Sonia. "This is the Grand Line remember?"

"Ah, I can help with that!" Camie exclaimed. Using her tail like a spring, she hopped over to the ship's side, shouting out something in a series of clicks and whistles that only Chopper could understand, translating it as asking the fish for directions.

A moment later, a large silvery arrow formed under the water's surface made by hundreds of fish, pointing in the same direction and then moving off. As the ships began to sail in that direction, Luffy entered the bridge, moving over to where Nami was working the tiller. "Are you sure you're okay with this? You aren't just being nice for Camie's sake?" he asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Nami smiled at him before turning back to her work. "I'm sure. I was telling the truth. Hachi was only mean to me if someone else was around."

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure that you were all right with it. And if the first thing that pops out of Hachi's mouth isn't an apology to you, I will beat one out of him," Luffy promised.

Nami laughed, shaking her head. "That'd just make you a bully at this point. If he doesn't apologize, let me do it, he's less likely to be turned into a corpse."

"No one messes with my crew," Luffy said with a shrug. "I figure if I keep beating that into people, it'll stick eventually, and I might not have to make an example when Hancock starts flying my flag."

Nami nodded but turned from the wheel to look at Luffy closely. "And are you sure of that?" she questioned, turning his own phrasing against him. "I realize that she could be a major help in freeing ace, but still..."

"It's a big a risk," Robin said from behind them, coming up and hugging Luffy around the waist, her chin on his shoulder. "And it is a risk that could backfire hugely."

"It is," Luffy agreed with a nod. "Still, I'm game if she is."

Robin frowned and opened her mouth to say something, but was interrupted as Zoro, once more on lookout duty, shouted out, "Oy! We have something out there, some kind of flying creature. It's coming closer." A second later, he amended, "They are coming closer. There's at least three of them."

"Where away?" Luffy shouted.

Zoro shouted a direction, and the three of them looked in that direction, seeing three objects in the distance coming closer. They were indeed flying fish, in appearance like a catfish crossed with tuna, with huge winglike fins. Staring at them through the spyglass, Luffy slowly nodded in approval. "Okay, those are kind of cool."

"Indeed. I most definitely wish to capture a few of those Flying Fish. Breeding them on Amazon Lily would help us defend ourselves even better," Hancock murmured.

The two captains stood there watching the Flying Fish, who sounded almost like Zero fighters to Luffy's ears, buzzing the ship from high above. Then they turned, racing back the way they had come. Luffy watched the creatures go, snickering. "Oh no, they know we're coming. They will have plenty of time to set up some kind of trap. Oh no."

Hancock snorted, tossing her hair back, although she didn't assume her full patented haughty look. Rather, a playful droll note was notable in her voice and body language. "Indeed. I am quaking in my boots."

Nearby Robin looked at the two of them and, feeling the need to tease, brought up a finger to her lips, wondering aloud, "Hmm... now, what would your reactions be if I decided to use my Hana Hana powers to take all of our current prey for myself?"

Both Hancock and Luffy turned to her, one in amusement, the other utterly shocked. "Robin..." he whined. "Don't do that to me, please? I want some fun at least."

"Mmm, I don't know..." Robin teased him for several moments until Zoro reported seeing a structure of some kind on the ocean ahead of them.

When he did, you might have thought the Flying Fish Riders were a group of seagulls for the lack of tension in his voice. Everyone aboard the ship, bar maybe the MVA members, knew that anything short of a marine commodore wouldn't be a threat to the combined crew. "It looks like some kind of floating dock. Seems to be shaped like a 'C.' And there are at least seven other flying fish around them. They're coming in."

"Ahhh, they're firing at us from the sky!" Camie shouted, taking cover under the barrel of one of the ship's guns. Several members of the Moria Victims Alliance also started to run around, those who hadn't already retreated below decks.

"Huh... here's a question," from the flying fish came several loud bangs, and Luffy idly lashed out, smacking a cannonball away where it might've hit the deck. "Why haven't they recognized you, Hancock?"

"Hmm, a good question." Hancock also snorted, doing much the same a second later, neither of them bothering with Busoshoku for such slow projectiles. "My beauty comes through even pictures and paintings enough that most would do so quickly. But these buffoons must be blind to attack one of my gorgeousness."

"However do you move carrying an ego that large?" Robin taunted, her hands twitching with an urge to cross over her chest.

Before Hancock could retort, Luffy turned his attention upward, watching as Zoro stood at the edge of the crow's nest. There he started to send out single small slices of condensed air pressure, exploding or slicing into the cannonballs.

Aboard the scow, Lola, Sanji, Marigold and Sonia also dealt with the attacks easily. Lola used a two-sword style to redirect the cannonballs one at a time, striking them with her swords. Sanji kicked them back towards the circling flying fish. Marigold used her trident to lash out with an air pressure attack herself to a cannonball coming in near the back of the ship, while her other hand smacked one of the panicking MVA crew away before he could run into her in his panic. "Honestly, useless men. Go below if you're going to just get in the way."

"That almost sounded nice, sister," Sonia smirked next to her as she hopped into the air, using her own trident to redirect several cannonballs, shaking her head. "Are you going soft on me?"

Marigold replied to this with a curse that was both vulgar and anatomically impossible, while the Flying Fish Riders, seeing their long-range assault was doing nothing, closed. Seeing this, Hancock strode to the front of the ship, having just won a rock paper scissors match with Luffy.

"You really do have bad luck with that, don't you?" Franky mused, looking just as annoyed as his captain did. He hadn't needed to do anything. The others had dealt with the attacks easily.

"I wanted to beat them up," Luffy muttered, pouting.

Ignoring them, Hancock stood at the prow, staring up at the flying fish and riders. "Do you not know what I am?" she shouted, flinging her head back so hard that she could only look at a few directly above the ships. "Come after me if you dare!"

Flying this close to the ship, the riders of a few of the Flying Fish could finally see Hancock clearly. And they had the normal reaction straight men did to her beauty. They fell under her spell. Five of them halted their attack, instantly pulling their flying fish to a halt in front of the prow shouting out as one, "Oh my god, what a beauty! It's the Empress, Hancock-sama! Please grace us with your orders!"

Two became so entranced they rammed into one another, falling into the ocean. One other leaped off his ship, going to one knee in front of Hancock, holding a bushel of roses out to her. "Your beauty has entranced my heart. Please take these as a gift!"

This left two of them attacking the scow, which soon fell to an utterly enraged Lola. "God damn it! Why can't someone see me as that kind of beauty, huh?! **WHY!?**"

Everyone around her wisely stayed silent as she leaped into the air, twirling her swords around and lashing out in both directions to slice the two pilots and their fish out of the sky.

While Makino, Nami and Laki were shaking their heads and watching Hancock turn the fivesome in front of her into stone, Luffy had looked behind them, taking in the sight of the

floating docks. He saw several cannons set up to fire into the center of the 'C' shape, although there wasn't anyone in sight. A crane thrust out over the water from near the center of the 'C', holding a small cage.

Inside the cage was Hachi the Octopus Merman, hence Luffy's incredulity. "Why the hell is a Merman being kept in a cage over water?"

Hancock snickered. "Hah! I agree that is a sign of such gross stupidity that it brings down the intelligence of anyone nearby forced to see such idiocy."

"Aren't you going to save him!?" Camie nearly shrieked, with Pappag joining in.

"Oh well, I suppose so. Zoro!" Luffy ordered and then waited for Zoro to come down from the crow's nest. "You deal with the cage. I get to deal with the trio of utter morons masquerading as Mermen. Honestly, merman putting another merman in a cage over water. Ugh."

"Oy, captain, don't damage the wharf much." Luffy looked over at Franky, pointedly ignoring Zoro's demand they play rock paper scissors to see who would deal with what. Franky grinned back and pointed a large finger at the wharf. "That's both workspace and material in one."

Luffy laughed and then zoomed off, using a mixture of Soru and Geppo to close with the docks. The next second he stood in front of the three merman. "Hey, you three. Can you fly?"

"Bah, what the hell're you asking, moron?!" shouted one of them, holding up a sword as the others held up a large mace and an even larger saber. the one with wide eyes and pasty skin kept on speaking even so. "We're fishmen, we swim, we don't fly! Don't you got eyes!?"

"Pity." With that, Luffy stepped forward, grabbing one of the swords, a kick lashing into one of the merman. He squealed as he was launched through the air, shouting "GOAAAAAAL!" following him.

The other two were similarly dealt with. "Now, since Franky asked me not to damage the wharf..." a duck and a roundhouse kick later and the one called Tansui, whose voice Luffy recognized, was sent skittering over the ocean, bouncing like a stone. "One... four... ten... fourteen... twenty! Nice, a new record."

Smashing Macro's sword in two as the last one slashed at him, Luffy grabbed his jaw, then slapped him several times until the Merman's cheeks looked almost comically swollen. "Idiots like you annoy me. Seriously, what was your plan, huh? Just those Flying Fish Riders? Dumb. And that's not even considering the whole merman in a cage over water thing. Honestly..."

Watching this from his cage, Hachi sweatdropped, shaking his head. "Nyu, I'm almost feeling sorry for Macro now."

"Yeah, well, before that, there's something else you need to do right now, right, eight-boy?" Zoro growled, causing Hachi to start, staring up at him. At some point, while he was watching the one-sided beatdown, Zoro had crossed the intervening distance and was now standing on top of the cage, one sword tapping impatiently on his shoulder. "Something to do with our resident orange-haired witch?"

"Erk..." Staring between Zoro, his captain and back to the ship, Hachi spotted Nami standing among a large number of women, her style standing out among them. Nami, the young girl his former captain had essentially enslaved, just like so many of their own people had been, and who was currently standing next to Camie. "Nyu...Nami, I'm sorry! I'm sorry I didn't stand up to Arlong. I'm sorry that he treated you so bad. I'm sorry about everything he did to you and your town."

Nami stared across the waves at the octopus Fishman, then sighed, a part of her very thankful he hadn't mentioned her mother by name. That would have been too much. "I, I suppose I accept your apology. You can cut him loose, Zoro."

Zoro did so but then looked over towards Luffy, who had finished off the three Fishmen, watching as Luffy came under fire from one of the large houses built onto the docks. A hundred harpoons blasted out at him like they were flechettes rounds.

But to Luffy, they were moving in slow motion. He ducked and weaved through them, then watched as still more harpoons were fired from the same direction this time one at a time, but far better aimed. Luffy watched as a giant bull burst out of the house, with an equally large rider on top of it charging toward him.

"Straw Hat! You aren't who I really got beef with, but you'll do to start!" the man shouted as he charged forward. "Your cook, Black Leg Sanji, is the one I want!"

The man wore a black leather jacket, black leather pants, and a helmet with a grill covering his face. In one hand, he held a club that reminded Luffy of Alvida's weapon. In his other hand, the large man held a Gatling gun. It had multiple barrels, seven of them rotating as he came on, firing out harpoons. They looked muzzle-loaded, but the rate of fire was still fast. And behind him, the man had tossed another gun, some kind of larger rifle with a massive muzzle.

Even from where he was standing on the floating docks, Luffy could hear Laki's shout of delight back on the ship. "EEE! Enel's head on a pike, I want that! I want that so much. When we finish with him, I claim that as my share of the booty. I could do so much with that kind of barrel design. Why did that never occur to me before!?"

Standing next to Laki, Franky looked at her, seeing the stars in her eyes and chuckled. "One track mind there, huh, nee-chan?"

Laki glared up at the taller man, giving him the finger, as she muttered, "And you're so different when it comes to ships and ship building?"

"Heh, nope, just pointing out you should probably get your crazy under control."

"On this crew?" Laki snorted, and Franky snickered, acknowledging the point before they looked back to see exactly how Luffy would deal with this guy. *I'm hoping for something comedic. This whole fight's been like that after all*, Laki mused.

Wiping at the dust on his shoulder, Luffy stared up at the giant man on his giant bison, and when he spoke, his tone was almost lazy. "So, what's your story then? Given your shouts about Sanji, it's gotta be something personal. But I don't think I've ever met someone as tall as you, let alone someone who would ride a bison into a fight. Ya know, those things are only good for short sprints, right, and their horns ain't nearly large enough to be a threat. Ya just come off looking like a dumbass who can't decide if he's some farmer goin' to market or a dark knight makin' do with a subpar horse."

Aboard the ship, Sanji and Chopper both held up notes, respectively saying seven and six out of ten. Robin also thoughtfully cocked her head, then decided, holding up a nine out of ten sign. "While the setup was rather long, I quite like jokes that mix taunts with observations like that, particularly ones that give you information you might not have known."

Chopper scoffed. "You're biased, Robin."

"And you're still annoyed about being used as bait, doctor-kun. But I believe that the good has certainly outweighed the risk to you in this case." Robin patted Chopper on the head, watching as events played out on the docks. "I am not saying that you should not get back at Luffy. Just realize your sacrifice was not in vain."

Grumbling, Chopper nodded, turning away and staring over the ship's railing towards the confrontation on the wharf. *Confrontation, hah! That's like watching a reindeer confront a Lapahn. A newly born reindeer and a fully grown bull Lapahn!*

The man in the iron helmet hadn't heard any of this, obviously and kept his attention on Luffy, bellowing his response. "How dare you, you bastard! Making light of my tragedy, of my life! You, you don't know, man, you don't know the horrors I've seen because of your crew, because of Black Leg."

"Oh no, he's going to monologue..." Luffy murmured. He wanted more than anything to charge forward and interrupt the man, but his burning hatred for Sanji was too much of a mystery for him to interrupt the explanation.

"The, there I was, leading my people. We were just your normal, everyday mafioso, lording it over the folks but not doin' much bad. And then suddenly, the marines came after us! We'd nevera done anythin', anythin' to get them after us, after me! But then they were there, comin' after us every time we turned around, every time I stuck my head out! All of 'em after me, after me, because I had **his** face!"

The man tore off his helmet, tossing it to one side, shouting, "But I'm not him, I'm really not!"

What was revealed was a shock to everyone, for the man's face was all too familiar to the Straw Hats and anyone who had seen their bounty posters. There, in all its 'glory' was Sanji's bounty face. The doodle. The face drawn by an artist far too used to using his camera instead of his pencil. Matted yellow hair like a haystack flattened into a bowl shape covered the man's head, including one eye, the rest of the face equally circular, with wide lips and a flat nose. It even had a spiral eyebrow over its one visible eye.

For a moment, everyone aboard the ship was still, and then Zoro began to guffaw, nearly falling off of the crane holding Hachi's cage as he began to howl in laughter. Luffy joined him instantly, falling to his knees as he bellowed in laughter. Within a second, everyone aboard the ship bar Robin and Hancock, who only smiled or chuckled, began to lose complete control of themselves. Soon the MVA aboard the scow joined in, and from both ships, the sounds of laughter arose. So loud was it that circling seagulls fled in shock at the cacophony, louder even than the sounds of battle previously.

Sanji went incandescent with fury, his eyes turning into a bonfire as a battle aura the likes of which Luffy had rarely seen in this world exploded around him. Seeing this, Luffy came back to himself, nodding to acknowledge the other man's progress. *That is pretty damn good! I think I might have to start teaching him some stuff from the Tendo style of Anything Goes. They make more use of battle aura and stuff like that than the aerial, the old Saotome-style.*

Luffy watched as Sanji charged forwards, crossing the intervening air space within a second, landing with both driving into the head of the bison. Twirling in place, he smashed the mace aside with one foot, then the harpoon gun with his other foot, kicking it out of the man's hand and out over the back of the floating docks.

Luffy was moving before Laki could shriek, grabbing it out of the air before the gun could go too far. He bounced back to the ship with the large gun in hand, dropping it in front of the older girl. "Happy now?"

"Hell yes," Laki cooed, grabbing the gun and cradling it against her chest.

Franky looked down at the weapon speculatively. Or maybe it and Laki's chest. It was hard for Luffy to tell with the guy's sunglasses on. "A rotary system," he mused, looking over at Laki. "That's interesting, isn't it?"

"I know, right!?" Laki grinned. "Oooh, I wonder what else they have around here?"

A few of the Kuja came over, looking at the weapon speculatively. "We don't usually use cannons, considering our bows are more dangerous," Ran grumbled. "But given our losses in this recent battle, maybe we should think about something along those lines?"

Hancock snorted but didn't say anything. Instead, she watched as Sanji began to wail on the man, murmuring to Nami, who was standing next to her, "I think that your cook has some serious issues."

Nami chuckled dryly, scratching at her nose and looking away as screams and cries for mercy resounded from the docks.

Soon those cries receded, and Luffy looked over at Sanji. "You done?"

Sanji huffed, nodding his head. "I'm done."

Luffy looked down at his handiwork and whistled. The man's face was now completely different. Before, he had been kind of ugly. Now he looked almost like a bishounen, specifically the kind of pretty boy who would be part of a band, the singer at the front of the group wowing all the girls. *But who probably don't have nothin' under the hood, so to speak, heh.*

Aloud he said, "You hit his bone structure enough to change his face! That is one heck of a... feet... Sanji."

Sanji groaned at the pun, shaking his head. "Booooo, hiss..." Staring down at his victim, he chuckled dryly. "Ehh, I'm still furious, but that face should never have existed. This way, at least no one else can share in that pain."

"Okay, so... what do ya want to do with him now?" Luffy inquired. "I mean, those Mermen might still be alive, but they are so dumb I doubt they know up from down. He's the only one of the Flying Fish Riders still alive." Hancock hated slavers and kidnappers, so she had shattered the six statues of the riders who had come close to her. Lola had killed two more, and the last two had been turned into pincushions by the Kuja as they floated to the surface after crashing.

"Eh... don't tell Hancock-sama, but I kind of feel sorry for him, really. No one should have to go through life with that face, especially after that idiotic cartoonist was allowed to make up my bounty poster." Sanji took a drag from his cigarette, then suddenly smirked. "Heh, I vote we ask Lola and her crew to take him with them. That way he gets to live and gets out of our hair."

"Okay, we'll do that, so long as we can find a Log Pose that isn't pointed in the same direction as ours." With that decided, Luffy looked over the ship. He watched as it fully entered the 'C' shaped docks, turning to starboard before dropping anchor.

All while most of his crew were in sight. *Good job, Eve*, he thought, reminding himself to have Sanji make something tasty for her. *Maybe that clementine sorbet he made once? I don't think she's had a taste of that.* Regardless, Luffy pulled out his hat from where he had stowed it before they arrived, putting it on his head. "Franky, you're up."

"SUUUUPPEERRR!" Franky announced, taking his normal diagonal pose for a second.

"All right, you lot, all of you up and off our ship! Kuja carpenters, you're in charge of the demolition teams. I want those buildings emptied of supplies and torn down. Don't make them into driftwood. I'll want those beams and nails in one piece. Laki, Rindo, head below and break out the tools."

As Franky continued to bellow commands, Hancock looked at the shattered remains of a stone statue which had formally been a Flying Fish Rider, the one who had jumped aboard the *Everlasting Resolve* to declare his eternal devotion to her. "Sweet Pea, sweep this up for the Straw Hats, would you?" Sweet Pea was somewhat in the doghouse for starting a fight two nights ago in the kitchen, so she was being given any scutwork that came up.

The large Kuja grumbled but obeyed, and Hancock turned her attention to other matters.

"Sonia, take half the crew and start transferring the stone members of the Victims alliance ashore. Aphelandra, Margarete, check these docks for supplies. Get Sanji to help if you need it. Marigold, I recall we want to keep the flying fish around. Indeed, put Ren and Blue Fan on two of them. I seem to recall they know how to ride horses."

Her sisters both nodded, and Hancock looked over at Franky. "Is there enough wood here for you to start making us a ship too?"

His nose wrinkled a bit. "Maybe," he said, one large hand waffling in the air. "There's certainly enough wood, maybe enough nails and other supplies. But if you want a ship as super as the *Everlasting Resolve*, I doubt there's enough metal piping for the toiletries and showers I could make ya."

"Showers!" the shout came back from all of the Kuja, nearly blowing Franky off his feet. Evidently, the shower system for the *Everlasting Resolve* had been a major hit. Something Franky reflected later, he probably should have figured out on his own, considering how many of the fights that had begun on the ship the past few days had been about access to those showers.

Regardless, he continued on thoughtfully. "And I doubt they have enough cannons. Still, we could make a go of it. But I'll warn ya, we don't have much spare canvas, and I don't think this place will either. And there's no sign of any ship, so no extra rigging. The mast will be a major problem for the scow, let alone a second ship."

Masts were among the most difficult segments of a ship to find. They had to be made of solid, semi-flexible wood and were, well, very large. There didn't seem to be any place to store them, and while Franky felt he could put together a decent enough substitute, there was a big difference between that and a real mast.

"We don't require canvas. If you can put a real rigging set on the other ship, that is enough. Remember, the Yuda Snakes are ours, and we have experience using them even here in the Grand Line," Hancock interjected, frowning thoughtfully. "But I would rather have a ship as good as you can make it eventually. We can deal with the crowded quarters for a little while longer for a full Franky Special... hmmm... but perhaps another ship that can get us home will do once we reach Shabondy? We might need one then going forward."

While Franky shouted super once more at the term Franky Special, Hancock looked over to where Luffy had just landed on the prow, about to offer his services to Franky. "Two points, Luffy. One, is there anyone else around?"

Luffy winced, realizing he had once again forgotten to use his Kenbunshoku. *I am a long way from doing that automatically. Blast it!* Looking at Hancock's expression and the faint uptick of her lips, she understood that too, damn it. Huffing, he closed his eyes and concentrated for a brief second using his Kenbunshoku.

A few seconds later, he shook his head. "No, there isn't."

"In that case, my second point is that I believe that this is an appropriate time to get rid of the Victims Alliance members and to move on with our own plans," Hancock finished leadingly, glancing over to where Lola and a few of her officers had arrived on Luffy's heels. No, they were bombarding Franky with questions and requests for their new (or rather redesigned) ship.

"While my entire being is suuuuper, there is a limit to what I can do at once," Franky shouted, but Luffy ignored that, looking back at Hancock and nodding once before heading over.

It turned out that the Flying Fish Riders had quite a good deal of supplies. Not in terms of building material, though. As Franky had warned, canvas and wooden spars appropriate for masts were impossible to find here. But they did have a large and well-stocked larder: Fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, spices, and of course, meat. Which was then added to by the masked man's bison, which Sanji had killed, somewhat accidentally, by landing on his head before wailing on the bison's owner. Much of that meat was now used for another large meal for everyone, although Hancock, Lola and Luffy made certain the crews kept working as well.

The next day, the *Scow*, as Franky continued to call the ship, was fully kitted out. It even had a few cannons, the ones that had lined the docks which the locals hadn't had a chance to

use. As for the masts, Franky hadn't been able to find anything that could be used to make even one.

But Camie and Hachi told them the sea here wasn't as deep as normal, an underground mountain coming up to only a few dozen stories below the docks, hence why they had been here in the first place. Hachi, who had helped Sanji feed the crews and generally kept his head down led Franky, Luffy and a few of the Kuja down to some shipwrecks directly below the docks.

Between them, they cut away a few masts that were still solid enough to be used. Talk about refloating one of the wrecks was also discussed, but they didn't have enough supplies to really do that without further damaging the already old ships.

Zoro and Marigold then hauled the chosen masts up, while Hancock and Nami using breath dials and bowl-shaped glass helmets, scoured the vessels for more gold. They came up empty, obviously. On the other hand, the flying fish idiots had quite a haul, half of which was added to the combined stores of the trio of crews.

That was combined with the gold from *Thriller Bark*, which was divided into five. Two portions went to Lola and the others, along with fully half of the supplies they had found, with some extra bits of jewelry for Lola herself.

While the MVA had not been of much help since leaving *Thriller Bark*, Chopper had told Luffy that without them freeing the prisoners, Laki might well have bled out before Chopper could get to her, given Kumashi and the other zombies there. That was more than enough to convince Luffy they should be given some of Moria's gathered plunder, more so than the Kuja, who had, despite his and Hancock's plans for the future, had been an enemy at the time.

Beyond that, Sanji and his two helpers apportioned the food supplies out, giving the Victims Alliance numbers half of the gathered supplies and the majority of the meat from the Sea King from earlier that day. With that and careful food management and a few recipes he handed over - not many, only Lola had tried to help in the kitchen, and she was there to once more attempt to Suborn Sanji – the MVA would do alright.

"I really can't believe you finished all this work in a single day!" Lola exclaimed, staring at the ship in front of her. It still wouldn't win any prizes for prettiness, and the difference in types of wood between the masts and the rest of the ship was sort of startling, but it would still be good enough to get the crew where they wanted to. "You even finished putting up the rigging! I thought that and that final mast wasn't finished."

"Eh, Franky and I worked on it all throughout the night," Luffy explained.

"OW Yeah! My captain here swings a mean hammer," Franky exclaimed, slapping the shorter man on the back, causing Luffy to look at him with a smirk.

Back on Water 7, Franky had been astonished at how good Luffy was with his hands when they built the *Everlasting Resolve*. Further, Luffy's ability to hold the masts in place on his own was a major help. They had spent most of the night working on the ship, telling jokes and bonding as they worked.

With it being just the two of them, it reminded Franky of when he was younger working with Tom's Workers. Although the older man had to admit that he and Iceburg had never had this kind of friendly-ribbing and jokey sort of relationship.

"Really, I can't thank you enough for this," Lola said, shaking her head, her hands resting on a pair of weapons at her side, hanging from a new belt that was part of a new outfit made from Pappag. It was a very stylish outfit resembling a noblewoman's riding suit with tight leggings, long boots, and a white shirt. A cutlass and pistol rested there while Lola's second blade was strapped to her back. All in all, Lola looked much less the victim, and much more the pirate, if one ready for a Sunday ride in the country.

Nami smiled, happy to have helped the woman whose shadow had kept her from being kissed or married to Absalom (she still wasn't certain which part bothered her more) while Luffy just nodded and prepared himself for the inevitable.

He was not disappointed. "Can't you marry me?!"

"Ha, weak," Luffy laughed. "And no. I am the man who will be the Pirate King! If you can't take that kind of heat, we shouldn't get together."

Robin smiled faintly, reflecting. *It is a good thing then that I am already such a thorn in the WeeGee's side. If I was not, that kind of comment might concern me, but as it is, I rather think which of us will be seen as the bigger threat eventually could be chosen by a coin toss. Although I am somewhat concerned about Nami and the other girls.*

"Yes! The four-thousand, seven-hundred and ninetieth rejection was a good one too!" The Risky Brothers exclaimed, dancing around her.

They also had new clothing, a few bits of Sanji and Zoro's clothing having been altered by Camie and Pappag for them. The rest of their crew hadn't yet gotten anything new, but they all looked far cleaner than they had back on *Thriller Bark*. Two days' worth of food rations for those who hadn't been turned into stone had helped offset the near-starvation diet before that, but Luffy knew that Chopper was still very worried about the crew's overall health, especially those who had been turned into stone.

To offset this, Chopper had loaded them up with all of the pills and supplements the Straw Hats had, hoping that would be enough. But given how few such things the crew had before this, that had wiped them out entirely of medical supplies bar the devices that Chopper had taken from the Rainbow Mist and basic gauze.

Regardless, it was time to say goodbye. Nami had predicted that there would be a heavy wind this morning, perfect for getting the ship moving. After a few more minutes of heartfelt farewells, Lola boarded her new ship. Zoro and Luffy helped push the ship away from the docks, A heavy breeze came up, just as Nami had predicted, and the ship unfurled its sails, heading out and away from wherever they would go. Nami and Sonia had given them a Log Pose that they'd found on the docks, and it hadn't been pointing towards Mermaid Island.

"Well... wherever they're going, they'll be going there with a pretty good ship," Franky muttered, crossing his massive arms over his chest. "I'm still not quite as satisfied with the shape of the keel as I should be, but everything else I was satisfied with. It isn't super, but it will do the job."

"So what now, captain?" Brook asked from where he had been playing an upbeat song about partings. Over the last twenty-four hours, he had been a help keeping people going by continually singing songs that made people laugh or singing a tune people could work to.

Luffy grinned over at him, then gestured around them. "The Flying Fish Riders said we're within a day of the Archipelago, correct? And we've got more than enough food here. I say we party. And..." he pointed over to Hancock, "The two of us have that ceremony we need to do to make things formal."

Robin found herself twitching at that and saying, "You mean the alliance contract, correct?"

"Right," Luffy answered, looking at her in some confusion. "What did you think I meant?"

"Never mind," she muttered, shaking her head.

For her part, Hancock's mind seemed to disappear into an imagination-induced fugue before coming back with a thump and a massive blush, looking over at Robin. "Er, well, I um... I..."

Oh no, she can be cute too!? How is that fair? Robin thought, fighting back a blush of her own with difficulty, her thoughts somewhat mirrored by Luffy. But Robin bore through her momentary lust to concentrate on more important things. "If we are doing this, we should hurry up. According to all my books and what I have learned traveling across the Grand Line, formalizing this deal is traditionally done at either noon or evening."

The Kuja were left on the docks to prepare, with Brook and Robin helping for now. Meanwhile, the other girls used the showers first, then it was the guy's turn, with Sanji and Chopper finishing quickest. Sanji normally dressed formally if the weather permitted, but he also had to prepare a feast for this.

Much to his chagrin, Robin insisted that Luffy also dress in his most normal clothing. Admittedly, this wasn't much, but it did include a jacket he had found once, the same kind of jacket that Gol D. Roger was famous for wearing. This was red with long sleeves and a high neck. In terms of design, it almost looked like a pirate's version of the marine officer's jacket. With that, black pants, and a white undershirt, Luffy felt he was ready.

Coming up on deck, Luffy was almost struck dumb by how good Robin, and admittedly the other girls, looked. But it was Robin who grabbed his attention. She wore a blue and black outfit, a black blouse-skirt combo, with a was not wide, stomach-spanning belt with gold buckles, the top open showing a distracting amount of cleavage. Since the skirt barely fell a few inches below her crotch, Robin's legs were covered by light purple leggings. Over the blouse-skirt thing, she wore a long open coat with wide sleeves.

Feeling Luffy's eyes on her, Robin smiled back, preening slightly.

Laki was dressed in some of the clothing she had picked up in Water 7, while Makino and Nami had opted for full cocktail dresses. Makino's was a slinky number that came down only to midthigh but rose up to the neck, hugging her chest but showing no cleavage, instead being shoulder-less, thus showing an inordinate amount of side-boob. Nami's cocktail dress fell to her ankles, with the side open to halfway up her thigh and a rapidly descending neckline, showing a large amount of cleavage.

Brook cleaned up the best behind Sanji among the boys, with Franky a distant third. While Zoro and Chopper... "Guys, I know that I don't exactly dress up all that easy, but you two look like animals stuffed into suits," Luffy sighed, shaking his head.

Zoro scoffed, crossing his arms. "And that surprises you how exactly?"

"Yeah! I'm a freaking Zoan. Of course, I don't look good dressed up. Maybe if Pappag had a few days to work on it, but as it is?" Chopper grumbled before he was picked up by Camie. He had been forced to wear a heavily modified suit from Sanji, which had accidentally shrunk in the wash.

"Don't listen to him, Chopper-chin. You look great!" Camie giggled, nuzzling her cheek against Chopper's, enjoying the feel of his fur. "All of you look good."

"This is true happiness!" Sanji shouted, dancing around her, then lifting Camie into his arms. "Now, if you will excuse the presumption, madame."

With that, Sanji hopped into the air, making for the floating docks. The rest of the crew followed, with Nami in Zoro's arms and Franky being carried the few hundred yards in the air by Luffy.

When the Straw Hats arrived back on the docks, they found that the Kuja had also dressed up slightly, as much as they could get their normal clothing anyway. This basically amounted to adding tassels with little bells or beads on them that tinkled and danced as they moved. Most of them were sitting in a few rows behind their officers, staring straight ahead.

The Straw Hats all touched down across from them, with Brook and Sanji moving to the side, quickly joining the remaining Kuja and the observing Hachi and Pappag, who seemed awed at what they were witnessing. Camie might not have understood the importance of this, but the more well-traveled duo knew that the idea of a Shichibukai and an upcoming pirate allying was without precedent.

Brook moved behind a series of drums and other makeshift instruments Franky had put together earlier that day. There, Brook began to beat out one at a time, a deep thrumming noise coming from one drum, accompanied by the tinkle of symbols from the Kuja. His violin was set nearby, ready to be picked up at a moment's notice. *It would not do to be slow to shift to happy music, after all, Yohohoho.*

Sitting formally in front of her officers, Hancock was the exception to how the Kuja were dressed. She was dressed in what Luffy called a Chinese qipao, golden earrings in her hanging from her years, in a way that Luffy had not seen before, Hancock having routinely taken them off for the battle on Thriller Bark.

Above that, she wore some kind of headdress that must've been made on the spot. Luffy supposed the colors on it, red, blue, and dark green feathers, probably meant something to the Kuja. *Although again, where she got feathers... although they look like seagull feathers. Okay, that's one mystery solved. Now, where did the paint or dye come from?*

Shaking that thought from his head, Luffy strode forward with his crew behind him. Luffy sat across from Hancock, looking her in the eyes. Their first mate s nearby, arms crossed and glaring. While this was Zoro's normal look, Marigold still had reservations about this whole alliance thing.

In contrast, the rest of their crew was at least okay about it, while Sonia was gleeful. She had become something between a friend and a student in navigation matters to Nami. Not a day had gone by since the Kuja came aboard where she wasn't in deep discussion for at least half the day with the orange-haired girl.

With Luffy being the individual who would be the leader of this alliance/joining – it was kind of ephemeral, which was occurring here - he took the lead in the ceremony, grateful that Robin and Franky had talked him through it earlier that day. "I, Monkey D. Luffy of the Straw Hats, future Yonko and Pirate King declare this negotiation open. Bring out the articles."

No one knew where the tradition came from, but at some point, pirates had begun to create 'articles,' rules, and laws for themselves. A lot of the larger crews wrote down

agreements of how the crew, or crews, should act. The same concept was put to work when one crew joined another like this. Makino and Franky had both speculated that pirates had taken up this kind of thing because pirates were not exactly law-abiding by the very definition. But social conventions, especially ones they signed on with, were much harder to break.

As the oldest there, bar Brook, who had volunteered to provide musical accompaniment, Franky moved forward, carrying two large rolls of parchment. This he set down in front of Hancock and Luffy one after another, his voice bellowing out, "These are the Articles of Union agreed upon between the Straw Hats and Kuja Pirate crews, led by Straw Hat Monkey D. Luffy and Pirate Empress, Boa Hancock."

The watching crews listened as both captains made it a point to read the articles. "Article one, the Straw Hats and Kuja are now aligned. While the Kuja will continue to act independently, Monkey D. Luffy will take overall command whenever joint actions are required. Article two, from the moment this change of allegiance comes out, Monkey D. Luffy will use his name and flag to protect Kuja Lily, home of the Kuja, in place of Boa Hancock's Shichibukai status. He will stand ready, as a Yonko, to defend their people against any enemy."

There was a beat as everyone there nodded, even those Kuja who had not yet heard all the details. The watching Hachi nearly collapsed to his rear in shock, a loud, "NYUU!?" coming out before he could stop it, and Pappag just fainted dead. Camie looked confused but didn't want to interrupt the odd human ceremony to ask what had shocked them both so much. None of them had known the full details before this, but the two more worldly members of the trio understood the importance of what they were watching. Though they didn't know why Luffy was the one taking the lead, not having seen him use his lightning powers or having a clear idea as to why Hancock and her crew were sharing a ship with the Straw Hats.

"Article three. Upon agreeing to this commitment, Monkey D. Luffy waives all rights to govern, tax, or lead the Kuja people. Article Four. Boa Hancock will act as First Captain of the Straw Hat Fleet should other crews come to join them. She retains all rights and privileges of an independent pirate captain. Article Five. Boa Hancock will follow Monkey D. Luffy in rescuing Fire Fist Ace from the World Government and any further group actions."

At Franky's nod, Brook stopped beating the drums, as did the other Kuja, and Makino finished the ceremony. "If these articles are acceptable to both involved, sign your mark, take your drink, and may the oceans claim your souls if you ever break your oaths!"

"I accept these articles!" Luffy shouted, writing his name down before taking up the massive saucer of sake set in front of him.

Zoro retrieved the parchment from him as Marigold did the same for Boa. They exchanged the two parchments as Boa Hancock shouted, "I also accept these articles!"

The two pirate captains clanked the huge sake saucers together, then drank them down in one long gulp before hurling them out over the sea, shouting, "Davy Jones and Mother Ocean, take our offerings and hear our oaths!"

For a moment, the two of them grinned at one another, then Brook began to play an upbeat tune, his voice ringing out over the small crowd. "And now, with the serious talk done, we party!"

The pirates, Kuja and Straw Hat alike, needed no further urging, and Sonia and Nami led the way, leaping to their feet and starting a furious jig, with the others soon joining in. Luffy whooped, and he held out a hand to Hancock, who blushed slightly before the two of them headed into the crowd, dancing the afternoon away. That dance turned into several more with Hancock, her sisters, and his own crew's ladies.

At one point, Luffy actually transformed and sang a few songs as Brook played them, including one song called Queen of the Pirates, which Brook had made up a few days ago. Moments later, the still-female Luffy saw Nami, Zoro and a few Kuja were locked in a liver-slaying drinking contest. Perona was an obvious early victim and now lay splayed out on the dock next to Zoro, looking as if she was mumbling under her breath. Those nearby could barely hear one word in three, but it seemed as if she was mourning Moria's death... in her own way. "An... so many cutey zombies... an, an... Kumashi...Moria, *Hiccup* pretty good boss... lazy, fat eel. Kumashiiii...."

Then Luffy found herself being dragged into her own contest with Hancock with a set of bows they had made over the past few days. Which devolved into a kicking contest, then a punching contest to see who was stronger. Having had a bit too much sake, Luffy lost the first two contests but won the last one. Not that Luffy could begrudge Hancock her victories, she just looked so smug and satisfied it was hilarious to Luffy. And she was a good sport when she lost a wrestling contest in under two seconds, although why she was so blushy and shocked about it, Luffy was too tipsy to think about.

Later that evening, as the party finally began to wind down due to lack of sake, Luffy decided to take the rest of the night off from being Luffy the pirate captain. Instead, he wanted to be Luffy, the boyfriend.

Robin had retired from the party early, removing herself to the roof of one of the few buildings still intact. There she lay out, having changed into a striped blouse that came down to her thighs and long boots. It wasn't quite nice enough out for a bikini.

She blinked in surprise as Luffy hopped up onto the roof, a basket in his hand. He paused then, staring at her legs, having to shake his legs to turn his attention back to her actual face for a moment. "Hey, pretty lady, you want to get out of here for a bit?"

"Around here? Luffy, there's no place to go," Robin giggled, shaking her head before she went on teasingly. "Unless you wish to just take me back to our quarters, which, while nice, would not be what I call a romantic date."

"Ugh. Can you blame me for staring? We ain't had more than one kiss since hitting the Florian Triangle? But no, I had something more romantic in mind than just tossin' ya over my shoulder and rushing off to bed." Luffy gestured over to the outer area of the 'C' shaped docks. "I moved the waver over there this morning when I made up some goodies. So long as we keep this area in range of my Kenbunshoku, we're good."

Taking a small Waver out onto the Grand Line away from the ship was very much the opposite of a good idea in Robin's mind, but Luffy did have a point about his Kenbunshoku. *And his other point about us not having any time alone is far too accurate. The crowded quarters have not been fun to deal with. I honestly didn't mind sleeping in the book nook, but everything else has annoyed me immensely.*

So Robin found herself nodding, setting her book aside and standing up, moving into Luffy's arms as he made the basket disappear into his Ki space. "I am in your hands, Captain~," she teased.

Elsewhere in the party, Hancock turned from watching Chopper and several of her Kuja making fools of themselves watching as Luffy, with Robin held in a princess carry, leaped away from where Robin had been reading a moment ago. She couldn't see where they landed, but for some reason, that sight caused her to scowl just a bit, her cheeks puffing out as she looked away with a scowl.

Soon, the two lovers were sitting in the Waver, with Luffy controlling it as they pulled away from the docks. He wasn't nearly as good at it as Nami, but his body control was up to the task of keeping them from capsizing.

Soon enough, they stopped, well away from the floating dock and the rest of their crew. Above them, the sun had begun to set, casting the world in a myriad of colors, red, gold, and its normal yellow, reflecting off the water all around them. It was a view Robin had seen hundreds of times before, but somehow being out here with Luffy beside her made it seem better, more enthralling than ever before.

Yet Luffy didn't seem to realize that as he took his hands away from the Waver's controls, he began to apologize. "I realize this isn't all that romantic but I..."

Giggling, Robin held a hand to his mouth before leaning in and removing her hand only to replace it with her mouth, kissing him gently. Pulling back, she said simply, "It is more than romantic enough, Luffy, thank you. Now, come down here."

The two of them laid out on the boat's bottom, with Luffy's back propped up against the Waver's dial-engine and the now-empty basket, the wine bottle, glasses, and dainties set to one side. Robin sat between his legs, leaning her head back against his chest. Her feet stuck out over the prow of the vessel thanks to how tall she was, but she ignored that bit of discomfort, easily snuggling into Luffy's hard chest as much as she could, idly reflecting that if she wanted a comfortable place to rest her head, his other form would do better. That, however, reminded her of her attraction to women in general and thus to Hancock, which she resolutely set aside for the moment.

Luffy obviously didn't follow any of those thoughts as he too stared out over the ocean, watching the reflected glory of the setting sun. "Well, from the books Makino-nee forced me to read, romance is all about, you know, dinners at highbrow restaurants, sunbathing on the sand, music in the background and that kind of thing. Sure, the stars and sunsets were always mentioned, but they were the background rather than the majority of the romantic setting."

"Mmm, I rather think we've had music for the day, and seeing as the only way to add more would be to bring along Brook or one of the Kuja, I can do without it," Robin chuckled, shaking her head, a familiar thrill going through her as she felt the hardened muscles of Luffy's thighs under her fingers where her hands rested until she turned slightly, running one hand up between them to feel his stomach. Those were the muscles she most enjoyed feeling for some reason.

But Robin's thoughts had turned back to Hancock now, although from a very different angle than a moment ago. "You realize this will put an even bigger target on our crew, yes? And I am not just talking about rescuing Ace. Calling yourself a Yonko is a major step up. Are you sure the rest of the crew can handle it?"

That she could was not in question. Given her growing abilities with Busoshoku and her Devil Fruit, Robin was determined to reach an Admiral-level threat in a few more months, if that. But she was concerned about the rest of the crew. *Well, bar Zoro and Sanji, the other monsters of our little group.*

Luffy nodded soberly, his hands stopping where he had been kneading her thighs. "Yeah, I know. But it's unavoidable if we want Hancock's help, and we do. Heck, getting her to keep what happened on TB a secret is a big deal. Being willing to help us free Ace is huge. And honestly, in terms of my own fighting skill, I'm at least at an Admiral's level now with the Lightning Devil Fruit added into the equation. So I would be bringing down a lot of attention anyway."

Hearing Robin's acknowledging hum through where their bodies pressed against one another sent a delightful thrill through Luffy, but he forced his mind to stay on the current topic. *Serious talk now, fun later.*

"Of the rest of the crew, Chopper needs some serious one-on-one with me to start getting as good as he can be. He's already started to bounce between his forms and everything. Now, he needs to do it more, at a higher level, and take better control of his various forms at the same time. I think Zoro and Sanji are already growing as fast as they can. Both would benefit from more sparring and full-combat style training, but that's it."

He sighed his arms now around Robin in a loose hug. "Franky, Laki, Makino, and Nami are the main issue. Although the Kuja could probably help Makino just as much as they could you."

"Me? I'm presuming we're still talking about combat skills rather than this ancient language they apparently can speak to command their snakes?" Robin riposted archly. "What can they teach me that you could not?"

"It ain't so much I couldn't, but that Chopper would benefit more from one-on-one training with me, sorry. The Kuja can help train your Busoshoku, and they can also train you in their own diluted version. Not the full Busoshoku armor type, but adding weight or heaviness to their blows. That could be big. As could more versatility with your Hana Hana no Mi. I can't really help ya there. Heck, I need to train up my own fruit harder too. Bigger attacks, while keeping the voltage up too."

Again Robin made that interrogative noise, and again Luffy shuddered beneath her. "Er, Enel-aho thinned out his overall voltage by covering a lot of area with most of his attacks. Keeping the energy of the attack the same, regardless of how large it is most of an issue. My first few large-scale attacks against Kuma, Moria and Hancock weren't nearly as deadly as they could have been, and I really should have done a better job across the board, not just by using my Lightning Fruit faster than I did. The only time I used it to its full potential was near the end. And don't get me started on Kenbunshoku. Just oy."

Robin giggled, turning lightly to kiss Luffy's neck and jaw as she heard the disgruntled tone in Luffy's voice. When she pulled back, though, she continued the serious talk for now even as she felt her body begin to respond to Luffy's thumbs gently rubbing along her stomach. "Mmm, and what about Franky and Laki?"

"Laki could hopefully stand to work with the Kuja a bit and the others so she can learn the Rokushiki as best she can. Franky's an issue. Maybe he and Laki can get together and..." Robin began to giggle at that, and it took a second for Luffy to realize what he had said. "Oh, you know what I mean..." he grumbled, his hands tickling her sides.

This proved to be a mistake, as several hands suddenly appeared all around them, poking and tickling everywhere they could reach as Robin wiggled out from his suddenly loose grasp. "One really should not challenge a centipede to an ass-kicking contest," Robin chuckled.

It took a bit to get back to the serious talk at that point, not that either begrudged the time spent. Eventually, though, Robin was lying side-on against Luffy's chest once more. They talked a time more about the crew and what kind of training they needed, touching on Sonia's idea for sending Nami to this Weatheria place for further training in using her weather knowledge as a combat technique. Then, however, Robin decided to turn the conversation back to Hancock. *I have to bring this up now before I lose my nerve.*

"You've been mentioning plans about the Kuja training up me and the others, and I agree. I also agree that Hancock could be a major help in freeing Ace. But I cannot help but notice that all those thoughts were based after the fact, so to speak," she began circuitously.

"Er, what?"

Sighing, Robin decided to be a bit blunter. "I noticed that these points were things you thought up after you wanted to make an alliance with Hancock. What sparked that interest in the first place? Why didn't you want to deal with her as you did Kuma and Moria? That way, there would have been no witnesses to your abilities. Well, besides Perona, but she is easily controlled," Robin added with an eyeroll.

"Er, I guess she just won my respect during our fight. When you're as good a fighter as I am, you can kind of get to know someone else just by fighting them, and with Hancock, there was a lot to admire," Luffy answered. For some reason, this topic was suddenly making him uncomfortable but he didn't know how to get away from it without it being obvious.

"Oh? So it wasn't that you became attracted to her?" Robin asked, trying to keep her tone from becoming accusing and succeeding for the most part.

Luffy gawked at her, but Robin continued on, turning the conversation back to the recent merger. "Indeed, I have to wonder why this whole alliance merger concept made so much sense to you and Hancock. Certainly, even now, I don't see Hancock has much to gain in the long term."

Grateful for the seeming change of direction, Luffy answered quickly. "Oh, that's easy. While she's got protection for her people, that protection comes from the very people Hancock wants to protect them from the most. She's never been happy about that."

"And you know Hancock so well? After barely a week of interaction?" Robin instantly turned this back, and Luffy realized that he had just been hoodwinked. "How do you know that, and indeed, how do you, or us, know she is not using her sexuality to force you in the direction she wishes? I do not doubt she would keep her word now after the Articles have been written and oaths given, but why?"

"I don't see Hancock being the kind to use her feminine wiles that much. Turn me to stone, yeah. Order other people around and us it, uh, call it tactically, sure. But not long-term. If

she was trying to manipulate, she'd be trying to turn me stone, not entering an alliance with me like this."

"...Perhaps not," Robin conceded, shrugging her shoulders. But again, how do you and her know one another so well? Why did you trust her enough to reach out to her as you did?"

The shrug did interesting things to her chest, which Luffy felt through his thumbs where they rested directly underneath her blouse-clad breasts, and his hands inched upwards for a second, squeezing before she lightly tapped them with her fingers, twisting around and pushing off his chest to stare into Luffy's face seriously. "None of that just yet. I'm trying to have a serious conversation here."

"Okay," Luffy nodded, letting his hands fall from her sides where they had moved as she had. "But, but what do you want me to say? I am not exactly good at this girlfriend/boyfriend stuff, but this whole conversation is going in a weird direction."

"Luffy," Robin began, then hesitated before deciding to just say it outright as her attempts to get him to admit it had failed. *And honestly, is that really necessary?* "I can tell the two of you are attracted to one another. I can even tell that began while you were fighting on *Thriller Bark*."

"Wait, what!?" Luffy blinked, shocked.

Robin stared back, then began to giggle, shaking her head. "Oh, dear, both of you not seeing it, that's just too cute. But yes, I think you are attracted to one another. You seek out her company, smile at her in almost the same way you do me, and you, as I said, have this understanding between you, as if you know each other far better than you possibly could in only a week. There is this connection there, Luffy, and attraction and affection are a part of it."

She watched as his eyes darkened in self-reflection, and to her relief, he did not try to protest or look away, instead taking her words seriously. She could almost see his mind at work, going through his and Hancock's interactions, and eventually, he nodded.

"I... now that ya pointed it out, I can't... can't unsee it." His lips quirked, and one hand rose to poke her gently in the stomach. "It seems I got a type, tall, dark-haired, strong and independent. And before ya say anything, I will state that in looks ya don't lose anything compared to Hancock. It's just she's gotten a better public reception thanks to the WeeGee having it out for you."

While Robin blushed rosily at the comment – after all, it wasn't every day that someone told her she was as gorgeous as the most beautiful woman in the world – Luffy went on, his tone turning deadly serious. "And you know I'd never act on it, right? **We** are together, you and me. Going behind your back like that wouldn't even occur to me. Hell in my mind that would be

more dishonorable than if I had slept with Vivi back in Alabasta knowing I'd be leaving the next day."

Robin smiled at that and leaned in, not mentioning that she still thought of that moment he shared with Vivi on the balcony of the palace in Alubarna was one of the most romantic things she had ever seen. The trope of a princess rewarding her hero after he saved the kingdom, her family and her life took a lot of beating. But mentioning it now would not be a good idea.

"Thank you for that, Luffy, and I know you more than well enough to know you would not go behind my back like that. But... I have to admit that her attraction to you is part of why Hancock jumped at the idea Makino suggested about having you use your name to protect her island. And... I cannot deny that I also find her quite attractive."

Luffy gaped up at her, and Robin looked away. "I would not act on it, nor do I feel the depth of emotional attachment the two of you occasionally show you are feeling. But as I said, I cannot deny she is attractive. Or that she and I have talked about this, and she is wishful of something happening between the two of you."

"Th, there's a big difference between that and, and sharing our bed with her," Luffy retorted. His eyes had a distinct deer caught in the hunter's sights look to them now.

"True, but you cannot deny you would like it, can you?" Robin smirked, gently rolling her hips against his, where she had felt his traitorous lower half responding to the idea. As Luffy gasped and tried to control his physical reaction, she continued. "Hancock has no desire to be a permanent fixture between us, which, given her domineering attitude, I would indeed have a problem with most of the time. But she still is wishful to see if a, a long-term, catch-as-catch-can relationship will work between you. She was honestly astonished she felt any attraction at all towards you, but once it was pointed out to her, Hancock did not want to deny it. At least not to her sisters and me."

"I... you make it sound so cold," Luffy muttered. Robin said nothing, and eventually, Luffy nodded. "If, if you are alright with it, I, maybe I could see where Hancock and I could go. Under those limitations, anyway. I ain't interested in drama, Robin. If you don't want this to happen, say so right now, and I will put my attraction to Hancock in a small box and drop it overboard."

Seeing the earnest expression on Luffy's face and feeling him controlling himself once more, Robin honestly thought about it. Robin thought about going back and telling Hancock no, she had decided to not let Hancock and Luffy talk or do anything. That Robin was just possessive like that. But she didn't.

For one thing, Robin wasn't that possessive. Yes, she had become annoyed by the glances and looks, but she wasn't a clingy girlfriend. She had no desire to control Luffy's libido

to the point he couldn't even look at a pretty girl or be friends with one. That would be hypocritical, considering how often Robin had been checking Hancock and some of the other girls out, even Zoro or Sanji, when they exercised without their shirts on. Taking in the attractive forms of those around them was simply something that happened, simple as that.

For another, Robin had found to her shock she actually liked Hancock. Not to the point of being emotionally attached to her, but she felt the other formidable woman could become as good a friend as Makino, Laki or Nami. And then there was the fact Robin **did** find the other woman physically attractive.

Above and beyond that, however, was the cold, calculating part of Robin. The part that knew they had a better chance of keeping this merger mutually beneficial and sustainable long term if the tension between Luffy and Hancock was allowed to release itself naturally rather than just building in the background. That Hancock might come to resent her personally and Luffy too if he just shut her down flat. And that was the last thing they wanted.

"I doubt you could do something like that, Luffy, but thank you for the thought. Yet I find myself willing to see what happens between the three of us. As for Hancock, she doesn't just want a roll in the hay. Indeed, she has little understanding of romance between a man and a woman at all, so what Hancock wants at all is still up in the air. But I am willing to see what happens, so long as she doesn't try to push me away, and I have her word on that. Don't push. Let whatever occurs do so naturally, and that will be enough for me."

Luffy's lips quirked, understanding all the qualifiers there and still very leery of this whole topic, let alone the end result. *And given my life as Luffy, who could blame me?* But eventually, he just nodded. "Okay. I still ain't willing to er, to start anything, but if this topic comes up, I'll see where it goes."

Deciding that was enough serious talk, Luffy reached up, threading the fingers of one hand through Robin's long locks, gently pulling her down towards him. "Tonight, however, is about us." With that, he kissed her hard, his other hand snaking down around Robin to push up her blouse. Grabbing at her revealed rear, squeezing slightly hard, having learned that Robin liked a bit of pain in their lovemaking.

Robin returned the kiss, one of her hands moving around his head, the other falling to his chest, as her legs shifted to either side of his. Her hips slowly began to hump against him as Luffy pushed her striped blouse higher, revealing her panties.

However, the two lovers had forgotten that they were on the Grand Line and currently in a very small boat rocking away on the most dangerous sea in the world. The Grand Line had been kind enough to keep the weather around the docks nice enough over the time they'd been here, but as they began to make out, hailstones the size of the Waver began to fall out of the clear, now-nighttime sky.

Sensing danger, Luffy twisted so that he was laying on Robin and swung his arm around, smashing one hailstone to dust with a punch. But others fell into the water all around them, causing several splashes that sent water up over the boat and onto Luffy.

The now redheaded Luffy stared down at herself in consternation as Robin began to giggle, not even considering the continuing danger of the hailstorm all around them for a moment as she leaned up, pressing her chest against the shorter and less busty girl's. "I have mentioned how you woke me up to the delight of the female form, haven't I?" she whispered heatedly, kissing the redhead hard.

She dominated the kiss for several minutes as the two of them became soaked by continued splashes. But it was only when Luffy had to pull away slightly and smash another hailstone out of the air that Luffy began to give as she got, her tongue plunging into the other woman's mouth as she pressed Robin down against the interior of the boat.

But the Grand Line wasn't done yet. Seconds later, a whirlpool appeared nearby, pulling at the boat so hard it nearly capsized as it began to move sideways through the previously semi-still waters. Feeling that, Luffy reluctantly pulled away. Feeling rain mixed in with smaller hailstone, she pulled an umbrella out of her ki space and handed it to Robin. "Here, we might already be soaked, but there's no need for ya to get colder than ya have to while I steer us back to the ship. And if I don't do it that way, I'd wager Nami would keelhaul my ass for leaving the Waver behind."

"True," Robin replied, her chest heaving, and not every wet stain on her blouse was due to the waves from the hailstone. *Oh my, I do need this, don't I? Stupid sexy Luffy and his stupid sexy bodies.* "But can I ask if we could, ahem, get back as fast as possible?"

Using Kenbunshoku allowed Luffy to find the rest of their crew easily, and soon they were back tying the Waver up against the interior of the floating dock. The rain had stopped, and Luffy took a brief moment to change into her male body before frowning, feeling something else through his still-active Kenbunshoku. A mind that was part animal, part human passing high above them. If it had kept going, that would have been one thing, but as he sensed it, the mind began to turn back, coming closer.

Shit. Luffy reported this to Robin with a sigh, saying, "You go head back to the ship. I'll meet you in our room."

Luckily, most of the Kuja, including the officers, had all moved onto the docks since they had arrived here, very grateful to spread out. Hancock had taken over the masked man's hut for the duration, and Nami and Makino had moved back to their own rooms aboard the ship. So, there would be no need to kick anyone else out.

But Robin still pouted, an expression she wouldn't normally use but which she felt was necessary right now to show her displeasure. "Very well, but if you take too much time to see what that mind is doing, do not expect me to still be in the mood."

In return, the look she got caused Robin to shudder, biting her lip. "Heh, challenge accepted."

She was still chuckling at that as Luffy leaped into the air, bouncing up and to the side, looking to circle above the strange animal-human hybrid mind he could sense watching them from above to take it by surprise.

A moment later, looking ahead of him, Luffy saw the owner of that mind hovering in the thermals above the ocean. It was an albatross, but it wasn't like those that delivered the mail. First, it was larger, almost as large as a grown man. Second, this albatross wasn't white. Instead, its colors were almost like some kind of camouflage, gray and blue, perfect for disappearing into the sky, be it nighttime or day. It wore what looked like a military helmet and had pouches festooning his chest and belly. The albatross was hovering in the air using its wings while also using one of its webbed feet to hold a spyglass to his eye, staring down at the Everlasting Resolve, where Robin was speaking to a few Kuja on night watch.

Seeing the creature, Luffy realized that his use of Kenbunshoku had just inadvertently found the answer to a minor mystery that Robin, Nami and Makino had talked about occasionally: how Big News Morgan got so much of his news. *It isn't just because he has a lot of connections. It's because he has his own albatross spies! That has to be some kind of Devil Fruit, right? I don't know what kind of Devil Fruit it is, but all of those albatrosses that deliver the news and ones like this one answer to Big News Morgan, so he's got to have some way of creating or training them or whatever.*

That line of thought didn't stay in Luffy's mind for long because he knew this was a major problem. *No way can I let it report anything, even if it's just that Robin's alive and allied with the Kuja. But who knows what else it's seen?*

With that in mind, Luffy closed quickly, coming up behind the albatross. Before the albatross spy knew what was going on, it felt a hand clamping down on the back of its neck. "Now, I'm an easy-going kind of guy. You're not directly threatening my crew, so I'm not going to just, you know, kill you and turn you into albatross cutlets right now. I also don't want to make an enemy of Big News Morgan, and my crew passed on that he's already lost way more albatross than he was happy about in the past few months. Nod your head if you're able to understand me."

To Luffy's utter lack of surprise, the albatross nodded once before slowly twisting his head around to look back at Luffy with one of its eyes. Luffy grinned at it, hopping there in midair using Geppo. "That's good, isn't it? If you were just a dumb trained animal, I'd be forced to kill you."

The albatross's eyes widened, and it shook its head from side to side frantically, making pitiful squawking noises. "Good. Now, I'm not going to insult either one of us by asking you how long you've been up here or why you're here in the first place. However, I am willing to make you a deal."

The albatross's frantic shaking calmed a bit. It slowly nodded its head again as Luffy flipped up and over it, now bouncing in front of it. However, he still retained his grip around the creature's neck. "So here is the deal. You don't print anything about us for now. Sit on this for two weeks."

The albatross didn't respond, simply looking at Luffy, then cocked his head to one side. Its caw this time was much calmer as if the creature was asking, 'so what's in it for me?' When Luffy said those words aloud, the albatross nodded once, still staring at Luffy, its fear slowly replaced by something like interest. *These albatross really are almost human in how they think*, Luffy thought with some amusement.

"Well, besides sparing your life, how about an exclusive interview with myself and the rest of my crew at the end of those two weeks? Only a few at a time, but eventually, Morgan will be able to interview each and every one of the Straw Hats. A tell-all exclusive," he repeated the word, internally laughing as he knew this would be another way to put the screws to the WeeGee in a very big way. "In which we tell you everything that we have done since Water 7. Including the death of two Shichibukai after they were sent after us. And everything we will do in the intervening time."

Even better, they wouldn't be able to move against Big News Morgan. It was well known that he had ties to at least two of the Yonko, and although he could be compelled monetarily to toe the line, trying to silence him entirely was impossible. The WeeGee's own paper would print what it was told, but Morgan had nearly as many followers worldwide, and if the stories differed, people's faith in the WeeGee would go down every time Morgan's version was proven more accurate.

That wasn't something Luffy would have thought about, but Makino and Vivi had talked about the power of perspective and public opinion in the past, as had Robin and Hancock more recently. And he also knew that for Big News Morgan, scandals were a big draw.

The albatross stared at him, its eyes wide, then began to nod before pausing before shaking his head. Luffy frowned at that. "Okay, that is going to take some unpacking. Do you have paper and a pen? Can you write?"

The look the albatross gave him clearly asked if Luffy was an idiot, and then the albatross placed the spyglass it had been holding into one of its pouches and, with Luffy still holding its neck, used both webbed feet and wings to reach into several of its other pouches, pulling out a notebook and pencil. It began to write, not very neatly, but understandably and Luffy read what it wrote.

"You would need it in writing? Well, that's easy enough, I suppose... And you don't want me to tell anyone about you? You specifically, or that Big News Morgan can create his own flying ninja core?"

The albatross's eyes gleamed, visibly happy with the idea of being called a ninja. It nodded firmly, poking its beak towards Luffy to emphasize the point.

Luffy thought about it for a few seconds and then shrugged his shoulders. "I will have to tell my crew about why we're setting up the exclusive interviews, and a few of them are intelligent enough to figure out the reason for themselves if I try to lie. But none of us is the type to blab. I'd be willing to set that in writing as well."

The albatross nodded but then paused and looked back down, poking its beak down to the *Everlasting Resolve* in various places. Luffy recognized he was pointing at the Kuja, and he grinned. "Heh. Yeah, that includes Hancock and her crew too."

The bird's eyes widened noticeably, and he began to bob his head quickly, understanding the full import of that comment.

"Good, but let's do this quick, yeah? I've got a girlfriend to get back to." Luffy tightened his grip around the albatross's throat very gently to emphasize the point and the Albatross thrust pad and paper towards him.

Letting go of the Albatross, Luffy bounced away and wrote, "I, Monkey D. Luffy, upon discovery of..." He paused, looking over at the albatross cocking an eyebrow. But it shook his head, and Luffy shrugged, going on. "Of the ninja albatross heading to Shabondy Archipelago have demanded that you, Big News Morgan, do not print anything about the battle. In return for doing so later, you will earn exclusive interviews with my crew and me in the future. I put this in writing as captain of the Straw Hats and future Pirate King and will assume that you keep to it because if not, I will spread far and wide the news of your little ninja group and make it a point to wipe out any of them or indeed you if we meet at a later date."

Signing the note, Luffy handed the note over to the albatross, adding a wink as he did. "There, I think that's a decent mix of carrot and stick, yeah?"

The albatross seemed to shiver, and Luffy smirked before looking back down at the docks. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I was serious about a girlfriend to get back to."

The albatross watched him go, then stared at the message, seemingly having an internal debate for a moment, before it pushed it into his pouch, shivering slightly in terror once more before it continued on its way. Whether or not his creator agreed to the deal was up to Big News Morgan. The albatross still had a job to do, and it was still alive to do it.

By the time Luffy was back to the ship, Robin had made herself comfortable in bed, a book in her hand as she sat, her back against the bulkhead behind her. She had time also to use the dial dryer on her clothing, and hadn't bothered to change beyond that, so from this angle, Luffy could see straight up her blouse to her dark purple panties. He wondered if that was why she hadn't changed, and when she uncrossed and gently widened her legs, he had his answer.

Looking up from her book, Robin's voice was almost brusque as she asked, "What did you find?"

"Oh right," Luffy said, shaking his head. "Sorry, you er, kind of distracted me there."

"Then I am very glad I didn't give with my first thought of already stripping," she teased, causing him to gulp a bit, his hands twitching. But despite seeing that reaction and taking a certain delight in it, Robin was still curious about what he had found and repeated her earlier question.

"It was one of the news pelicans, but not like the one that normally brings the news..." From there, Luffy explained his aborted conversation with the creature.

When he finished, Robin hummed quietly. "Now, isn't that interesting. I have always wondered about how Big News Morgan gets his news. So was it trailing us, or did it just come upon us and decide to investigate?"

"Judging from how it was moving before I sensed it, I think it was heading in another direction when it caught sight of our ship. Maybe the Shabondy Archipelago? Regardless, the *Everlasting Resolve* is kind of obvious, you know."

"True," Robin nodded. "And the agreement you made with it seems quite well done if Big News is willing to go along with it. The alternative was killing the creature and seeing how Franky and the others made a good impression on Big News, that would have been a bad move, I feel."

She then smiled at him as she deliberately set her book on the bedstand. More than anything else, that showed that her earlier words about possibly losing interest in continuing their evening had been a complete lie, a fact proven by her next words, despite the joking, teasing tone she spoke in. "And have I mentioned how much I think quick thinking is sexy?"

Lime Start:

Luffy moved forward, leaning down and kissing her. Robin returned it and then pulled Luffy down onto the bed before, to his surprise, twisting to one side and then rolling out of bed, leaving him there. She stood up and pulled away before he could recover, smiling sultrily at him. Her hands went down to the bottom of her sweater-like blouse as she moved as if she was dancing to unseen music.

Robin had planned to do a bit of a striptease. In many of the books she had read, it was a surefire way to get the woman's lover worked up. But when she pulled her blouse up above her waist Luffy was off the bed and taking her in his arms, she grunted in pain as his lips crashed into hers, but she enjoyed it, pressing back just as hard as his hands wound around her, turning and leaning down so that she was on the bed once more, landing gently despite the passion of his kiss.

She then gasped in shock as Luffy gripped her sweater blouse with both hands, one by the bottom, one by her shoulder, and tore it in half, tossing the pieces to either side.

"Ahh! Please don't get into the habit of destroying my clothingMMMMmmmm!" her words broke off as Luffy kissed her, although a part of her really liked the show of strength. Some deep womanly part of her that Robin equated to the cavewoman portion of her brain enjoyed the fact that not only was Luffy strong enough to do that, but she was pretty enough in his eyes to warrant that response. Then, Luffy leaned down, kissing her neck and further downwards, and all Robin's analytical thoughts went out the door.

As Luffy rubbed one thumb over her nipples, he had a very... interesting... idea. *I know Robin likes a bit of pain, and she likes to use her own Devil Fruit in the bedroom, so...*

With that, Luffy very, **very** carefully let a tiny bit of electricity arc between his fingers, catching her other nipple between them. Robin gasped, then moaned in delight as Luffy, emboldened, used another small bit of electricity to burn away her panties directly above her clit. Robin had an idle thought that it was a good thing that she had shaved her privates bare because if she hadn't, that little act might well have caused real pain.

As it was, it not only sent a very intriguing tingle through her but allowed Luffy easy access. He quickly followed up on this, two fingers gliding over her pussy lips, finding Robin wet. Not wet enough for them to move on from foreplay just yet, but that was fine. Luffy licked her nipple, then the tip of his tongue, glowing with a teeny bit of lightning, licked and bit and kissed his way down until he could dive down into her pussy.

"AHHH!" Robin gasped, bucking off the bed. But she was unwilling to just lay there and let Luffy do all the work, and closing her eyes, Robin concentrated on her own Devil Fruit powers. Hands began to appear, reaching for Luffy's clothing as two mouths appeared behind his ears, licking and biting. She couldn't do the same two-handed tear thing that Luffy had just done to her dress, but having enough hands on the problem solved that issue, and Luffy soon found himself pants-less, his shirt quickly joining his pants in their destruction.

"Oy, and you just told me not to tear your clothing. I guess I'll have to buy some more dress-up type clothiNNNG!" Luffy's words disappeared into a grunt as lips appeared on his inner thighs, kissing and licking at his shaft and balls.

A second later, a hand appeared, the palm of which began to play with the top of his cock. A second mouth soon appeared on the conjured hand's palm. Luffy let loose a second groan as that mouth opened, and Robin took Luffy's length into her mouth, her real mouth open, letting out a breathy moan.

It took a moment, but slowly Luffy got used to the feeling and, seeing the sultry yet somehow challenging look in Robin's eyes, dove back down into her pussy, another tiny bit of lightning appearing on the tip of his tongue. *Fine, if it's a challenge you want, let's see which one uses our powers better on this kind of battlefield.*

Needless to say, both of them were winners.

Lime End

OOOOOOO

Nami looked up as Robin and Luffy joined the rest of the crew on the docks, smirking slightly at how Robin seemed to be moving very gingerly. "Rough night?" Nami teased, her tone slightly mocking yet gentle and somewhat wistful. While her ship had sailed, understanding what Robin and Luffy were doing together still made her wonder what might have been possible if she was into girls and hadn't acted so selfishly.

Sighing, Robin sat down, nodding thankfully to Makino as she held a glass of coffee for her. "The endurance of our captain is a source of great delight... and sometimes annoyance and pulled muscles," Robin explained, causing snickers all around as she took several large gulps of coffee.

Hearing this, Hancock blushed, looking at Robin thoughtfully and then back to Luffy, who had just passed her a glass of pineapple juice, Hancock's favorite drink, her thoughts going in directions she was unused to. Robin just nodded once at her and then gently tapped the table with her knuckles. 'I believe that now we have all awoken and taken aboard our caffeine of choice, we should have a serious conversation. Our alliance has been finalized, and we are close to the archipelago. I think that we need to make some concrete plans going forward."

"I've had a few ideas." Luffy nodded, leaning back in his chair and propping his feet on the table. Then Makino coughed at him, giving him a gimlet glare. He sheepishly lowered them, rolling his eyes at her, before continuing on. "Hancock, how much longer before you're called by the WeeGee?"

"The marines," Hancock corrected. "Recall that it was Tsuru who organized the ambush on you." She chuckled humorlessly. "Mind you, if she had any idea how low she was selling your fighting skills still too cheaply, I doubt she would have bothered. Instead, Tsuru would've been desperately searching for ways to appease you. Too late now."

Luffy snorted, "Far too late," and the two captains exchanged a vicious grin. Between their various contests during the party, they had discussed what would happen after saving Ace, and Luffy had plans. Plans to make it clear to the WeeGee and the marines he was fed up with them and wasn't going to take it anymore. That this would help him build his reputation as a new Yonko was a nice bonus.

"In any event," Hancock went on, after looking away with a faint blush from where she and Luffy had been looking at one another. "I believe that we can expect a call sometime today or tomorrow. Indeed, I am wondering why they have taken so long to contact me as is."

"Could the Great Staff Officer have decided to send a marine vessel to check on things?"

Hancock frowned but then nodded. "That is certainly something she would do. I confess it should have occurred to me before this."

Shrugging unconcern, Luffy gestured for her to continue. "Do you think that you will be able to lie to her?"

"Certainly," Hancock drawled. "She does not know me nearly well enough to see through my lies, especially through a snail phone. But what should I say to her is the question. I want our story as well-prepared as I can make it. I already know we will be mixing truth with lies, but how?"

This took a few moments to hammer out, but eventually, Hancock had a general idea. The next topic was saving Ace. Robin took over the conversation at that point, gesturing to Sanji and Sonja.

"The three of us have been talking about this since the idea of Hancock-san and her crew joining us was first brought up, and we believe that there are two routes forward for us. One way is to sneak into Impel Down. We could do so by impersonating Marines or as part of Hancock's crew, acting on the last request from a defeated opponent to tell Ace, your brother, that you have died."

"How likely is that to work?" Nami asked, crossing her arms and shaking her head. "I'd bet it would work on someone like that Admiral with the topknot. What was his name?"

"Momonga," Zoro answered instantly, nodding his head. "It probably would work for him. That guy seemed honorable. And have I mentioned lately how jealous I am that you fought him?" he added, looking over to Luffy.

Luffy smirked back at him, but any taunt he would have replied with remained unsaid as Nami continued as if Zoro hadn't spoken. "But would it work on Tsuru or any other marines?" to that bit of hardnosed logic, no one else had anything to say, and the orange-haired girl gestured to Robin. "What was your other plan, Robin?"

"Hancock, the marines told you they intend to execute Ace in Marineford, correct?" Hancock nodded, and Robin went on. "In that case, they will have to move Ace from Impel Down to Marineford, yes? There isn't some secret underground or underwater system to transfer Impel Down, is there?"

"Not to the best of my knowledge," Hancock snorted, understanding Robin's point.

Luffy understood too and grinned viciously. "We take them on the high seas. That sounds supremely piratical, doesn't it?"

The others all laughed, and Hancock giggled, looking at him for a moment with a blush on her face before regaining control of herself. But Nami, who had appointed herself the voice of reason at this point, had to rain on their parade a bit. "How? No one here knows where Impel Down is, so interdicting the ship or convoy isn't possible, and we sure as heck don't have any maps that show its location either."

"Actually, while we don't know its precise location relative to where we are now, we know some things," Sonja demurred. Reaching forward, she made a clear space on the table, then placed three items down within it, commenting on them as she did so. This is Marineford. This is Impel Down, here in the Calm Belt. And this is Enies Lobby. It's well known that the three make up a triangle."

"Isn't that the place where the Marines came from that Laki and I had to fight it out with at Water 7?" Luffy asked.

"It is indeed. It is the entrance to a manmade current called the Tarai Current," Sonja explained. "By closing or opening the Doors of Justice, the marines control the current that will take you straight to Impel Down or Marineford. The story is once you're through the Doors of Justice there, you're never coming back."

Nami shivered at that but pushed her fears to one side, wondering how such a thing was possible and why it mattered. "I still don't see what you're getting at, sorry."

Sonja chuckled, waving one hand in front of her face. "Don't worry, I have no idea how they could do it either. Maybe it was a natural phenomenon that they simply took advantage of?"

Nami nodded, indicating that could be possible. Her other idea about using mermen to change the geography of the ocean floor and thus changing the underwater currents, something that she knew was possible given her how her maps had been used by Arlong a time or two. "That's not what I'm wondering about. I am asking why this matters to us?"

"Well, that is where you come in," Robin looked at Nami speculatively. "You are called the cat burglar, but exactly how good are you at stealing?" Robin hadn't seen Nami act like a thief since coming aboard the old Resolve.

"I'm one of the best," Nami answered instantly. "Why?"

"Because according to rumors and what I've personally seen when I was just a pirate instead of a Shichibukai, every Marine base has a set number of Eternal Poses. And one of them here in the New World is always to Enies Lobby," Hancock murmured, understanding where this was going. "The faster to transport prisoners, you understand."

"So, we use the Eternal Post to get there, and then what? We'd still need those doors to open when we get there. And any attempt to force the issue would warn the marines that something is going on."

"That is where the Shabondy Archipelago comes into the plan, and it's special bubble coating that Hancock and the Kuja have told us about," Robin answered. "After all, once those doors open, who is to say that only a Marine ship can go through?"

Robin continued to outline the plan that she, Sanji and Sonja had come up with between them, with Hancock and Luffy now asking more questions about it. Luffy agreed with most of it, although she disagreed with a few points, and then, to illustrate one of them, splashed himself, turning into his female form. "I think that some of this is a job for bounty Hunter Luffy," the redhead chuckled evilly.

"If it's necessary, that is definitely an idea," Hancock agreed with a nod, staring at his female form appreciatively. She had gotten used to seeing it, of course, but Luffy had neglected to change out of his shirt, and it was now clinging to her chest, abs and shoulders in interesting ways while also looking very loose on her in others.

And unlike Robin, whose eyes had been opened to her bisexual nature since entering into a relationship with Luffy, Hancock knew she was bisexual. Indeed, she had thought that her time as a slave had turned off men entirely until Robin and her sisters had made her aware of her attraction to Luffy. What to do about it, though, still eluded her.

"We might also want to call in any other allies we have." Makino looked thoughtfully toward the two captains. "Hancock, do you have any allies? And Luffy, you know we do."

Luffy smacked a hand into his palm, nodding firmly. "Yeah, Bonney and his merry band! He'd probably be perfect for this kind of thing. But how likely is he going to be around her right now? We can't exactly wait, you know?"

"We won't know unless we can call them," Nami shrugged philosophically.

Luffy shrugged too, then gestured the planners to continue, asking a few questions. He looked over at Zoro, who nodded, crossing his arms, indicating he would be fine with his part of the plan, while Sanji just gave a thumb's up. Chopper's cackling at that point was kind of hilarious, though.

Then Luffy looked back at Nami, one eyebrow rising. "A lot of this will rely on you and your thieving skills. How comfortable are you with that?"

Nami shrugged consistently. "I'm good with it."

The planning session continued for a bit, and as they finished, Makino brought up another point. "We should call Whitebeard. Ace is part of his crew after all, and undoubtedly, the strongest man in the world has a plan of his own to rescue his crewmate."

Hancock nodded. "Whitebeard is famous for avenging his crew, yes. Indeed, rumor has it he calls them his sons, and that is a rumor I believe, regardless of Whitebeard's issues with the Kuja elders."

"But we should be cautious about calling anyone," Robin warned. "Remember, Den Den Mushi can be tapped by the WeeGee. Indeed, we should think about how to make certain our own family of Mushi is defended against such things. I have no idea how to do so, however."

"That's true. I suppose the geezer does deserve a call if we're going to be the ones to rescue Ace," Luffy mused, his eyes gleaming with delight at being able to twit Whitebeard.

Hancock chuckled at that, while most of the others looked a little scared at how Luffy was speaking of the strongest man in the world. But they all agreed it was a good idea, and within moments, everyone had gathered around a Den Den Mushi. Having joined the group, Perona shook her head, a visible shiver going down her body. A part of me still can't believe we're doing this."

"What's this 'we' thing? Unless ya got something to tell me, Perona?" Luffy quipped, winking at her, causing her to huff.

Nearby Zoro too snorted a bit, looking away from the pink-haired girl with a faint flush to his features. *Luckily no one saw Perona leaving my room late last night. We didn't do anything but kiss... a lot, but even so, that would be enough to get the others taunting me. Ugh. Girls, why the hell do they have to be so interesting?*

Zoro looked back at the Den Den Mushi as it began to ring. It did so twice before the other end picked up. "Hello, this is Marco, of the Whitebeard pirates. Whatja need?"

Luffy took a moment to reflect that since no Den Den Mushi was publicly known, it was obvious that whoever called Whitebeard would have a reason to do so and be known to them

before replying in the manner that Robin had coached him in. "Go black and call me back." With that, he hung up.

Halfway around the world in the New World, Marco stared at the Den Den Mushi, then shrugged and decided that this mystery was interesting enough for him to follow that suggestion.

Robin and Hancock had both explained this point to Luffy and the others. In terms of security, the general rule of thumb for Den Den Mushi calls was that the further away a call went, the easier it was to intercept. However, paired Den Den Mushi, Mushi coming from the same overall family as those used by the Straw Hats were more difficult to break into. And if a Mushi had been grown in some fashion that not even Robin had any idea about, it would become even more difficult to intercept the messages. If you had two black snails and were sending messages to and from, it was almost impossible.

Marco quickly called them back. The first words out of his mouth were, "This better be good."

"I don't know, Marco, you tell me. I'm just a little brother, out to talk to his big brother's family," Luffy said, grinning over at Robin, who nodded in approval. No names could be exchanged here. It was doubtful anyone bar someone he met knew Luffy's voice, but his name was too well known.

Marco instantly understood, and even if he hadn't, he recognized Luffy's voice slightly. Turning, he moved over to his captain. "Oyaji, you might want to take this call."

Whitebeard sat on his throne on the deck of the Moby Dick with nurses around him, as per usual, scowling as one of his crew read off a report. But now, he waved the man off and set down a tankard of ale for a moment, taking the Den Den Mushi from Marco, holding it up to his face, repeating his First Division Commander's words. "This better be good, brat."

"Hey, old man, you still think I need to come and see you in the New World for you to take me seriously?"

Perona eeped, her hands clamped over her mouth. Hachi looked like he was about to faint, staring like a frog hypnotized by a cobra at the Den Den Mushi, which now had morphed to show a large white mustache and a big chin. Even Hancock seemed startled at how Luffy was talking so cavalierly to the Strongest Man in the World.

Hearing that, Whitebeard's lips quirked, and he shook his head. "Yeah, brat, I do. Stand here on the deck of my ship, look me in the eye and say the words you did the last time we talked. Until you do, you still sound like a brat who doesn't know how big the real world is."

"I don't know. I think a certain alligator might disagree with you. If he was around anyway." Luffy's voice turned serious for a moment. "Or how about a gross vampire-leech cross or a vacation selling bible-thumper? Oh, but wait, they ain't around either."

Whitebeard's eyes narrowed, and he looked down at the Den Den Mushi thoughtfully, understanding who Luffy was describing. Around Whitebeard, his crew also stopped to listen, Marco in particular suddenly grinning and giving a thumb's up before sending one of the others to find Jose. That, he must be talking about Moria and Kuma. Moria isn't much, but Kuma? And both of them at once. The rookie's come a long way if so.

The idea that Luffy was lying or overselling himself didn't occur to Whitebeard. Given their previous conversation, doing so seemed quite out of character for him. "Hmm... that's an interesting list of characters. You've come a long way. Still, I don't think you'd be calling me just to shoot the breeze or brag. What do you want, pigtail?"

Luffy snorted but figured given everyone's fixation on his hat that the pigtail could maybe be missed. "Well, like I told Marco. I'm just a little brother, out to look after his big bro. Word is that he's got himself in something of a hole and needs a rescue. I've got a plan to do that, and I'm wondering if you want in."

"You dare!?" Whitebeard's blood pressure rose, and he scowled angrily, waving away one of the nurses as she touched his arm. "What do you mean you've got a plan, brat! I'm going to be the one to save my son! You just stay out of this. You've got your own adventures to have. This is an internal matter of my crew."

Luffy snorted, letting the loud noise serve him as an answer for the idea of him staying out of things. "Maybe you'll save him, maybe not. Depends on which of us gets there first. I'm looking to cut the journey short. What about you?"

Whitebeard's eyes narrowed, and his blood pressure rose as he growled angrily, "That plan, brat, shows how little you know. The instant you attacked, Spade will be taken back to his hole, and you'll deal with a bit of light, magma or ice."

For a moment, Luffy didn't get the spade comment, then remembered the name Ace had given his pirate crew. The rest he had an answer to. "Not if we're quick enough. Not if we can get away fast. And even if they come, what of it? It's a fight out on the ocean, where the advantage goes to the home team, so to speak. Just like in any other fight," he finished darkly. "Don't tell me you're dumb enough to fall for that?"

Teeth grinding could be heard as Perona and Hachi fainted dead away, while Franky and most of the rest gaped at Luffy. "Luffy, there's a difference between talking casually to the Strongest Man in the World and trying to start a fight!" Franky whisper-shrieked.

The sound of Luffy's crew reacting to his words actually caused Whitebeard to calm down, and he let loose with his patented laugh. "Gururarara! Disadvantages can be overcome if you're strong enough, brat!"

"But taking on that disadvantage when you don't have to is foolish, Whitebeard," Luffy shot back before deliberately goading the man further. "I didn't think you had bought into your own hype so much."

It took all of Whitebeard's power not to crush the snail in his grip at that last provocation, his momentary good humor disappearing. "Brat, if you were in front of me right now, I'd smack you so hard your ancestors would feel it!"

"That'd be an interesting trick considering who my family is," Luffy snickered.

Whitebeard's anger disappeared as he remembered exactly who this kid and Ace were related to. He went on more calmly, looking down at the phone thoughtfully. "You've got a plan to get past the first obstacle? A certain gate?"

"Yep. After all, every castle can be taken by getting someone on the inside. Or tunneling underneath."

Whitebeard hummed that, then shook his head. *That last bit matches what I was planning, but still...* "It's still too dangerous when your enemy controls the routes in and out. You can't really expect to escape unscathed. And in that environment, any loss to your transportation can have big implications."

"Heh, if they come at us, I intend to be the source of much scathing," Luffy growled. "I ain't saying it'll be easy. I'm not saying it's going to be without risk. But it's certainly better than walking into what is undoubtedly a trap."

Whitebeard scoffed at that, but looking over at Marco and Jozu, had to admit internally that the brat had a point. A part of Whitebeard had come up with his current plan to rescue Ace because he wanted a showdown with Garp and Sengoku, the last of the Old Guard like himself. *But Sengoku and Tsuru are too damn crooked in how they think about things. Even my own surprise might not be enough to throw off their game. And there are those reports on the Pacifista project my spies have reported... still, to set aside my plan and take on this brat's...*

Whitebeard growled, his pride rearing its head once more, overriding his ability to think, and he shook his head. "No, brat, I will rescue my son. You can wait around to celebrate after or join in my plan."

"Screw that Old Man! If you want to go it alone, then it's a race, and I'm gonna get there first." With that, Luffy hung up, leaving Whitebeard to stew on the other line.

The massive man glared down at the black Den Den Mushi as its face shifted back to normal, then tossed it with such force that Marco was knocked off his feet to much laughter from Jose and the others watching. He let his nurses fuss at him, feeling his old wound, the last one Roger had caused him, throbbing with his heartbeat.

For a moment, he thought of Garp. Of facing him and Sengoku again, one last time for all the marbles. Then he sighed. *I've let that idea dominate my thinking too much, along with the idea of punishing the World Government and marines for daring to capture one of my sons. 'Bought my own hype' indeed. And if the objective is really to just rescue Ace... but I don't have someone on the inside who could get into the Tiran Current, damn it. But... hmm... Luffy's right in a way...*

Within a minute, Whitebeard had analyzed this new idea and begun to formulate an entirely new idea. One that could back up Luffy's or let him continue his own if needed. "Jozu, call everyone. There is going to be a change in plans..."

Back on the floating dock near Shabondy Archipelago, Luffy looked around at the others giving everyone a thumbs up. "Well, that went about as well as I could have hoped. What do you all think?"

Everyone bar Zoro, Sanji, and Hancock were looking at him as if he had two heads, and Luffy began to laugh at their expressions, causing many of them to scowl in annoyance. Nami and Makino both lit into him, one about why he'd been so confrontational, the other about his general lack of respect. But after she recovered, Robin simply chuckled lightly to herself. *Hehehe, I wonder if I will ever get used to my lover's particular brand of crazy? I wonder if I ever would wish to?*

However, her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a Den Den Mushi going off. It didn't come from the Straw Hat's Mushi but instead from Hancock, who reached into the top of her outfit, pulling out a small Den Den Mushi. "Oh my. I didn't think we would have to have this conversation so soon..."

As they watched, its face shifted to indicate who was calling, and Luffy reached over, gripping Hancock's shoulder. "You got this, Hancock, just lie like hell, and it'll all be good."

Giggling at that, Hancock threw her head to the side, tossing her hair behind her and pulled the Den Den Mushi's transceiver up to her mouth.

OOOOOOO

Great Staff Officer Tsuru scowled in annoyance as she tapped the finger on her desk. The plan to execute Ace and bring Whitebeard to a battlefield of their choosing was going well. All of the different Marine officers and formations had been notified, with word subtly passed

onto the locals throughout the Five Oceans that they would have to step up and look after themselves for a time.

However, they had yet to hear back from the three Shichibukai she had organized to defeat the upcoming rookie, Straw Hat Monkey D. Luffy. *And with Garp always around coming in whenever he wants, this is the first damn time I've had to call them. And neither Kuma nor Moria is answering. Moria not responding, I was prepared for after what Hardy reported, but for Kuma to also not report is worrisome.*

Tsuru was relieved that after a few clicks, Hancock responded. Although her actual words brought no comfort.

"You," Hancock's voice growled viciously, "You have a lot of nerve calling me. You guaranteed that Moria would be willing to work with Kuma and me, and he most decidedly was not!"

Snorting, Tsuru waved her hand as if the Shichibukai's anger was as important as a fly. "Girl, get off your high horse! You're Shichibukai, pirates. It comes with the territory that you don't respond well to commands and often betray one another. You had to have known it was a possibility, and if you didn't have plans to counter it, that's your problem. Now give me a report on what happened."

"As you said, I'm a pirate. Reports aren't a pirate thing either, you Old Raisin!" Hancock barked back.

For a moment, Tsuru just glared at the little snail, who now stared haughtily back at her, its features having shifted to resemble Hancock's as much as it could. "Tell me what happened, or you won't get the other half of your reward."

Scoffing, the snail fell silent for a moment, then began, Hancock's tone sounding much calmer now. "We ambushed Straw Hat well enough. Moria's normal tricks worked, separating his crew before Moria sent in his zombies. Most of them were useless, though, thanks to Straw Hat and a few of his crew knowing Busoshoku. Then, Kuma and I confronted Straw Hat while my crew ambushed those left behind on his ship."

"Straw Hat was as tough as the reports indicated and too fast for Kuma to keep up with most of the time. He had to rely on his durability and his Devil Fruit which Straw Hat started to counter with his speed and tactics with frightening rapidity. He was always leery of mine, thankfully, and I almost caught him more than once. And thankfully, my hand-to-hand skills were enough to even the odds. Moria eventually joined us," Hancock went on, her tone dipping lower and darker. "But Luffy's energy attack, the blue one in the report, dealt with his shadows and actually caused the man quite a bit of pain."

"Hmm, he had no new skills?" Tsuru asked, frowning. The report seemed to be going well, but then, what had happened to *Thriller Bark*?

"He did have a few, but they did more damage to the landscape than anything else, as did Kuma's larger attacks. Straw Hat would simply dodge them or use his Busoshoku to take them without incurring any injuries. The island portion of Moria's giant horror ride took a lot of damage in our initial fight."

Hancock sighed, the motion carrying over into the Den Den Mushi on Tsuru's desk. "Then, one of my crewmen arrived, telling us that Moria's zombies had attempted to turn on us once most of the Straw Hats were captured. In the ensuing conflict, two of them were able to get away, with a possible third joining them. I have no idea how they escaped *Thriller Bark*, but thanks to the zombies turning on my crew, I lost my ship to the Straw Hat Crew's cannon fire before they were overcome. However, my crew did capture their ship, and I am keeping it as spoils."

Tsuru tsked irritably but wasn't going to argue. The woman had a point, after all. If Hancock had lost her ship, she needed another. "Would you allow us to examine that ship? From Garp's report, the thing is supposed to be an entirely new, innovative design."

"If I am in a good mood, perhaps. Do not hold your breath," Hancock retorted.

"Fine, whatever. So Moria betrayed you, and it became a three-way fight. What next?"

"Moria and I concentrated on one another for a time until I could catch him with my Melo Melo powers. Killing him eliminated all his zombies," Hancock went on, her tone almost dispassionate. "During that time, Straw Hat overcame Kuma. He finished the fight using the same odd cutting technique Aokiji reported. Kuma couldn't block it in time, and Straw Hat nearly cut him in half. However, Kuma landed a final blow and made it relatively easy for me to finish Straw Hat off."

"You are certain that Straw Hat is dead?" Tsuru demanded. "We would have preferred him alive, but his head will have to do."

"Then you will have to send in divers into the Florian Triangle. I was wounded, hells, I am still dealing with broken ribs, and Moria nearly tore my arms out of their sockets," Hancock grumbled. "He powered himself up with shadows pulled from the zombies and nearly overcame me before I was able to turn the tables on him. As for Straw Hat, I turned him into stone and then shattered the statue. After which, I retreated to the Straw Hat's former ship, and we were barely able to get away before *Thriller Bark* sank."

Grumbling to herself, Tsuru took in everything that was said. Moria's new technique was interesting, but if he too was dead, then they didn't matter so much as his loss did to the

upcoming plan. As for Kuma being dead, that was a problem too. "Blast it all, Hancock. You could have at least grabbed his head for some evidence."

"I have their ship, as well as their doctor. Who I am keeping, just like the ship," Hancock retorted. "If you wish, I will bring them both to Marineford at the time you told me to report for this plan of yours, but do not expect me to apologize. If not for Moria's betrayal, Kuma and I would have had a far easier time-fighting Straw Hat, but as it was, that was the hardest battle I've ever been in."

Snorting, Tsuru shook her head. "Hardest battle yet, girl, hardest battle **yet**. The war to come will make that seem but a skirmish. Still, I suppose the ship and the cute little critter will do for evidence. Get here a bit before the time I told you to arrive, and that will be that. Although did you see any fruits that might have absorbed the Devil Powers when Kuma and Moria died?"

"No. I didn't have any time to search, sadly. *Thriller Bark's* sinking was not a neat affair, and I had to get my crew out of there quickly," Hancock answered.

"And who among his crew survived?"

"The Pirate Hunter, and one man and one woman. The woman might have been the Cat Burglar, but my crew couldn't give me an accurate enough description of her or the unknown man. Though he might have been blond."

Tsuru tsked again. *Pirate Hunter Zoro, the man who slew Lucci and several other CP9 members. Damn, his being free could cause trouble later. As for the Cat Burglar, hmm... Hina said she was the crew's navigator. Blast it. That means they might have survived on the Grand Line. The blonde... maybe the cook?*

When she mentioned this and the fact they might have survived to Hancock, she was unsurprised by the younger woman's response. "Not my problem, old woman. You told me to kill Straw Hat. That is what we did."

"Of course, you wouldn't care. Hmm..., but where could they have gone..." Hancock remained silent at that, and Tsuru sighed. "Whatever. You did indeed do your part, Hancock. I'll want more details when you arrive in Marineford, but for now... good work."

She hung up before Hancock could say something pithy or disparaging, staring straight ahead. The lack of details annoyed her, but what could you expect from a pirate, even a Shichibukai? And I'll be able to get those details from Hancock when we see one another in person. *Now, how to keep rumors from getting out about this, or worse, Garp discovering what we've done? That would be a disaster...*

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Hancock rested the top of the Den Den Mushi and looked around at the others, smirking as Luffy gave her a thumb's up. "Well, that went well, I think."

"Yep. Let's get going, folks. We want to be at Shabondy this evening," Luffy ordered, and moments later, the *Everlasting Resolve* was moving off, leaving the ruined, picked over remains of the dock behind them, the Flying Fish with their new riders above them, two spyglasses peering ahead of them.

OOOOOOO

The marine battleship moved through the waves, its pace sedate, almost arrogant. It was not just the certainty of a ship that knew it was one of the strongest vessels on the oceans, but the arrogance of knowing a high-ranking admiral was aboard and thus that no pirate in their right mind was going to mess with his ship. The ensign over the ship, a single pink sword on the normal marine mark as background, marked that out for anyone in the know. For anyone who wasn't in the know, well, they would know very quickly.

The officer whose ensign that was leaned back, sipping at a glass of wine with one hand as she held a Den Den Mushi to her mouth with the other. "I know you want me to get back soon, but you know that the officer review for the marine base on Shabondy is well past due. If you're going to lug me with Aokiji's workload, I'm going to do it to the best of my abilities."

"We usually let the Archipelago go. It's the major crossroads point for all the routes through Paradise, so it has behooved us to look the other way. For many reasons," Tsuru's elderly voice answered, although unlike most of the time she spoke, her normal crotchety tone was barely discernable. Indeed, she sounded amused rather than annoyed. "And you know that what's his face? Dr. Vegapunk's bodyguard likes to go there every few weeks, so the lawlessness never gets too bad beyond the lower numbers."

"Yeah. But I also know that the supernovas have been reported already in the Archipelago. Why not sweep them up now?"

"Point," Tsuru replied, and any hint of reluctance was gone from her voice. "I wasn't aware you knew that, Gion."

"I have my own ears to the ground, you know," The younger woman snorted.

She was a woman of just below middle age, thin, tall, and well built, with long curly black hair she usually wore in a tight bun. She had a mole on her left eye and was currently wearing red lipstick and an officer's tailored uniform, the coat marked with pink, with a dark pink and black blouse, dark brown shorts, and black heels. Those shorts were quite short, and Gion knew that many of her men enjoyed looking at them as she walked around. One leg was also marked by a black widow spider tattoo. At her side rested a sword, its hilt white, its sheath brown.

"I want to meet up with this Kid character most of all. He's the one making the most negative news, and with a last name like that, he could all too easily become a legend."

"That's true enough. Very well, I suppose I can retroactively give you approval for your change of station. Just don't make a habit of it," Tsuru grumbled. "Do you want me to send the information we have about him over to you?"

"Bah, I've got the bounty poster and that of his second-in-command. That's enough for me. Where's the fun of taking on pirates if you know everything about them?"

Tsuru grumbled again, but then her tone turned teasing. "Fine, but don't come crying to me..."

"I have never come running to you!" Gion interrupted in mock fury.

"You did the first few weeks of your officer training," Tsuru retorted.

At that, Gion huffed, crossing her arms and looking away, something that the Den Den Mushi on the other end conveyed to Tsuru, causing her to chuckle. However, she went on more seriously. "Don't be afraid to ask for backup if you need it. We've lost two more Shichibukai recently, and we will need to retain our current combat power. The Supernovas might band together.

"If I need it, I'll ask for help. Otherwise, I want full control when I get there," Gion responded, chuckling.

"Barring a full disaster, you have it. Just remember that the Tenryubito are there too, so be on the lookout for them," Tsuru answered.

With a grin, Vice Admiral Momousagi grinned and, after a final farewell, hung up before hopping to her feet. She finished her wine bottle, set it down with a thunk, and marched out of her room, shouting, "Orderly, get a message up to the Captain. I want to know the instant we are within sight of Shabondy Archipelago. And when we arrive, I want every man and woman aboard the ship ready to go pirate hunting when we get ashore. The locals might be willing to just stick to the higher numbers and not look for trouble, but we will show them what marines should really be like!"

OOOOOOO

With the help of Camie's ability to talk to fish, the *Everlasting Resolve* made straight for the Archipelago. Ten hours of sailing later, the Flying Fish flying overhead spotted the first of the massive trees seemingly sprouting out of the ocean. The ship circled around the area at the far edge of the flyer's sight until it became dark. Then Luffy took over from the sails, powering

the ship forward. Silent and with their masts furled, the ship closed with the strange island-like structure as unseen as they could be.

Soon, they were moving among the trees, and Nami, Chopper and the others came out of the conning tower to stare at the trees in awe. These trees were huge, many of them the size of skyscrapers. Yet each of these trees was but the upwards-jutting branches of a much smaller series of trees called Yarukiman Mangrove.

The trunks of those seventy-nine trees continued down into the ocean, their roots on the ocean floor hundreds of meters below. The ground of the archipelago was created by a vast system of interconnected branches creating a floor on which enough soil and grass had piled to create what amounted to a series of natural islands.

In between each island was a narrow series of rivers, so to speak, and it was into on such the ship began to move. "Remember, we are moving inward from the outer edge, heading into the lower number of the groves. The lower the number, the more lawless," Hancock explained to Nami as Brook took a turn at the wheel. "We are looking for Grove 13."

"Ugh, I'm really hoping that isn't an unlucky sign," Nami grumbled.

Sonia put a friendly arm around her shoulder. "Don't worry, Nami. Where we're going, the only unlucky thing that could happen is one of the crew trying to swindle the bar owner."

Soon the Kuja, Franky and Zoro started to pole the ship forward, the river not really straight enough to let the *Everlasting Resolve* go at any speed despite the size of the archipelago. Indeed, within moments they were so well hidden among the large dirt cliffs and trees that the only way to see the ship would have been to stand directly on the nearest tree and look down at them.

When that happened, Luffy joined the rest of her crew on the main deck. She would stay in female form now, for as long as they were on the Archipelago, wearing the 'bounty hunter' outfit she had worn back in East Blue. She and Franky helped hide the ship for a bit before leaving most of the Kuja behind to watch the ship.

Staring up at the trees and seeing lights in the distance almost invisible through the trees at the distant lights of small communities or something similar, Luffy watched a few bubbles slowly form on the trees. She saw a squirrel hop onto one, using it to ascend into the sky, and laughed quietly. "Have I mentioned I love the Grand Line?"

Somewhat bemused at how little he'd had to explain or do yet, Hachi, who had volunteered to guide them through the Archipelago, gestured around them. "Nyu, like um, like Hancock-sama said, you have to remember the numbers. It's easy to know where to go so long as you can keep the numbers of the groves in mind and the general rule. The lower numbers are lawless. The lower number, the worse they are."

"Are we speaking about organized crime, Hancock-san, Octopus-san?" Robin mused.

"For some of the groves, yes," Hachi answered quickly. "The lower ten are definitely organized crime, slavers, kidnappers, etc. No one knows who runs it, but that's where the Human Auctioning House is located."

Camie looked to shrink in on herself at that, as did Marigold and Sonia. Hancock, however, simply bared her teeth in a snarl that should have been ugly and frightening. On her, it still looked scary yet gorgeous. Luffy also scowled, asking, "And let me guess, the marines don't do anything about it. Where are the marines?"

"Nyu... the marines are based on Grove 66," Hachi sighed, staring at the crew, Nami in particular. "I can't believe that you are actually thinking of stealing from the Marines. Normally pirates try to laid low beyond the mid-thirties. Trying to steal directly from the marines is the exact opposite."

"Then you really don't want to know about the rest of our plan," Luffy laughed darkly.

She leaped up into the air, landing balanced on top of a bubble, letting it carry her upwards. Chopper did the same nearby, followed by Nami, who laughed gleefully as she ascended through the darkness of the grove. However, once they reached the top of the trees, all of their bubbles burst. While the bubbles could handle going down into the ocean, there was a height level they couldn't get past.

Nami had barely a second to scream before Luffy caught her by her belt, snickering slightly at her as she bounded back down to earth. "So, how's that work on Geppo coming, huh?"

"How was I supposed to know?" Nami grumbled. "Besides, both of you were up here too."

Chopper shyly poked his fingers together. "Sorry, Nami, but both of us can use Geppo, you know."

Luffy snorted in amusement and looked over at Hachi and Hancock as they came down. "Well, you two are the ones with the name to drop. Where do we go from here?"

"Ooh, ooh, can we go to the amusement park! It's got a Ferris Wheel and a rollercoaster!" Camie suggested, waving her arms.

"You idiot," Pappag shook his head. "You're a mermaid. You can't..."

"Hmm... maybe later," Luffy mused, cutting across the starfishman's words. "We'll see."

"Nyu, before we keep going, there is one thing I need to say. Do you all know about the Tenryubito?"

Luffy and Hancock both froze, while Nami, Makino, and the others aware of Luffy's past winced. Hancock's response startled them, but the suddenly cold looks on both their faces had Robin moving before she could think of it.

Her taking Luffy's hand in hers was understandable. She had known she might need to calm him down and had done so on occasion before.

Robin taking Hancock's arm in her own and squeezing was not so understandable. Still, Robin persevered, deciding not to question her instincts and speaking in generalities, so none of the other crew members could put it together. "Calmly. Let Octopus-san talk. While causing trouble might be part of the plan, doing so needs to be done in a manner that benefits the overall plan."

Her boyfriend subsided quickly, while Hancock bit her lip, then slowly pulled her hand free from Robin's grip, nodding once and moving off to join her sisters, leaving Luffy to answer Hachi's question. "Yes, we know about the fish-bowl-wearing bastards. Yes, we know what will happen if we attack them. No, we're not making any promise to leave them alone. If we run into any, we'll decide what to do then."

Hachi stared back at the man who had broken his former captain's spine and shattered Arlong Park, then wisely decided to just nod and let it go. He could just grab Camie and flee via the ocean if it came to it anyway.

Leaving behind most of the Amazons, Hancock took Marigold, and with Hachi's help, the three of them led the Straw Hats through the night of the Archipelago. They had hidden the ship between the forties and the tens and moved from Grove 10 along its edge to where the teens started.

As Hachi had said, there were a lot of pirates and other illegal sorts here, and every time they passed a few trees, they saw another group of shanty houses, people caterwauling, drinking, and fighting. Or whoring, or selling stuff or any number of things. Obviously, life here in the lower numbers of the Archipelago was both hard and did not stop when the sun went down.

Some of this activity halted the instant the newcomers came in sight, and many of the locals looked at the large group, most of which consisted of women... hungrily. Most around the shanty dwellings were smart enough to not meddle with them or knew they weren't strong enough. But that didn't seem to be the norm.

The first group that attacked came out of nowhere, or so they hoped. But Hancock and Luffy had sent them coming and as the group leaped down from on high, lashed out before the

people were within fifteen feet, followed by Zoro and Sanji. Three attackers fell quickly, with another six following on their heels. Brook dealt with two more, and Franky caught the last in his own net.

Holding him up, Franky smirked as he hung him up on a nearby branch. "Oy, anyone want to use him as a target?"

"YOHOHOHO, he looks more like a pinata hanging there like that," Brook announced, looking over at Marigold. "Ms., would you like to take a whack at him and see if candy comes out?"

Laughing, Marigold just turned the man upside down, shaking him. Some change came out, and she tossed him aside. "That way's faster and far less grisly."

Snickering, Luffy picked up the one that she had taken out. *Huh, a few of these were trying to get past us to Camie. Might want to take a moment to help hide her tail better.* Setting that aside, she bumped her shoulder against Hancock's with a grin. "Hey, you want to play a game?"

The cloak-wearing ex-Shichibukai looked back at her quizzically. Like Luffy's change in gender and the various outfits most of the others, bar Zoro and Sanji, were wearing, Hancock was wearing a cloak to hide her identity. "What kind of game?"

"How far can they go?" With that, Luffy wound up and then punched the man she was holding up in her other hand so hard he flew through the air higher and higher until he disappeared into the upper boughs of the trees above them. "Yeeeeet!"

The still conscious man who had attacked Hancock had been looking up at her in awe after being knocked to the ground and seeing underneath the hood. Now however, he quailed visibly, his eyes widening in surprise and horror as Hancock reared back and kicked him like he was a football. The man screamed as he sailed through trees, but he didn't get quite as much air as Luffy's victim. "Mah, that is rather therapeutic."

"You need to wind up a little bit. You're imparting too much force to the point of impact rather than the whole of his body," Luffy advised. "Oh, and Hachi, pull Camie's skirt down a bit. Her 'feet' are showing."

While Camie was pulled off Hachi's back and her skirt pulled down over the bottom of her fin, Hancock scoffed, shaking her head. "I thought we were going for distance rather than height. I do not need your assistance."

"Game on then," Luffy grinned.

"Oh hell yes," Zoro snickered, pulling out his newest blade and shifting his grip on the hilt, so he was swinging the flat of the blade. "Worst score buys the sake?"

"Ah! I will send them to the moon for daring to attack Camie-chwan and the other ladies!" Sanji exclaimed before sobering at a cough from his gender-cursed captain. "Er, all except for you, Captain Aho."

"While I don't have the muscles for this, my bones quake with the desire to join this contest," Brook chuckled.

"OY, OY, let this Suuuuper Franky in one this!" Franky shouted, moving one of his shoulders to warm up. Marigold also smirked, cracking her knuckles. Sonia just kept on talking to Nami, explaining the coating process as best she knew.

Screams followed them from then on as group after group of thieves, kidnappers and teams of bounty hunters or outright slavers were beaten down and then punted away. Nearly all of them got into it, bar Sonia, Makino, Laki and Nami. They simply chatted away with Camie, finding the girl a font of information on the various shops and things that could be found in Shabondy.

Despite never having explored the Archipelago on foot, the waters around and through the Archipelago had allowed Camie to navigate around well enough. Indeed, people rarely saw her if she was careful. And if they did, well, mermaids were not known as the fastest things in the sea for nothing.

Eventually, they entered Grove 13, and from there, Hachi and Hancock led them through a slightly more inebriated, less violent area. They found a bar standing in front of one of the huge mangroves, its top marked by a large globe of green. The name over the doorway read Shakky's Rip-off Bar.

Blinking, Luffy looked over at Hancock. "I thought you said this guy was a bubble builder or whatever it is?"

"He is one of the best in the world. But let us just say that he has reasons to keep a low profile," Hancock answered with a nod.

"Would this be that Rayleigh person that you mentioned at one point?" Robin asked quietly.

Like Frankie and Hancock, Robin wore a long hood over her head to hide her identity. She also had a mask on below that, and the others had a bit of makeup or some other kind of costume on, with Makino and Nami's being the most elaborate: changing their hair color and outfits that had been cobbled together from the Kuja Pirates and their regular stuff. Nami wore

her dial-enhanced gauntlet, and Makino a series of guns set around her waist, but neither had used their weapons yet.

"Wait, you're here to meet him too!?" Hachi said and then became a little depressed. "Nyuu, and here I thought I would be able to really offer some help for your saving me."

"Give it time, Octo-man," Luffy shrugged but didn't take her eyes off Hancock. "Rayleigh?"

"It will be easier to explain once you meet him." With that, Hancock moved forward, opening the door into the bar.

Inside they found the bar was quite lively, although apparently, an incident had just begun as they entered, a man trying to run out the door. He ran straight into Luffy, and he automatically tried to grab her around her throat. Whatever he might have attempted, a small fist hammered into his diaphragm, then he was lifted up and over Luffy and tossed him towards the bar and the middle-aged woman making her way around it calmly.

She stood a bare inch shorter than Robin, her hair as black as Robin and Hancock's, with a thin body type and a pointed chin. Her clothing seemed closer to Laki's style than anyone else's, a black overcoat and a pink blouse with long pants. She was also smoking as she grinned cheerily at the young redhead.

Without any change of expression, she slammed the man's head down onto the bar, looking around at the others in the bar. "Anyone else want to welch on their tab?"

Chopper instantly hid behind Nami, who ducked behind Makino in turn, who simply nodded her head in stern approval. "I like her already. Any woman who can keep order in a bar like that has my full approval," she said aloud, drawing the woman's attention to the green-haired girl.

Once the man had paid up, Shakky looked over the newcomers, her eyebrows rising up in some surprise, and then she gestured to the bar in front of her. "Hmm, several face new faces, and maybe a few more that haven't been around in a while. Come up to the bar and tell this elderly lady your story."

"You don't expect me to touch that line with a ten-foot pole, do you?" Luffy quipped, moving through the bar with practiced ease. "You look a little understaffed with how busy it is."

The older woman shrugged. "Two of my waitresses didn't bother coming in tonight, and my regular cook is also not around."

"Nyuu, That's not a good sign," Hachi muttered, pulling back his hood a bit.

Hearing his voice, the woman's eyes widened, and she smiled happily. "Hachi! How are you? I didn't expect to see you for another few weeks. Unfortunately, I don't think that your octopus balls would be enough to help with this crowd."

"I'll handle cooking," Sanji announced, hopping up over the bar before bowing grandly to the older woman as the crowd went about its business. "If that pleases you, milady?"

"It pleases me very much," Shakky said, looking at him thoughtfully before reaching under the hood and touching his cheek. "Thank you, dear."

Sanji danced in place for a moment before almost leaving an afterimage as he raced into the kitchen. With food flowing, the bar's atmosphere had returned to everyone drinking and eating merrily.

Watching this, Luffy whispered to the others. "Find a few booths, listen in, and let Robin do her thing. Let's see if we can gather some additional info on the lay of the land." Everyone nodded, even Hancock, although she was looking around disdainfully at all the men. Still, she stayed silent in the corner for the next few hours and listened in with her sisters and the others.

Unfortunately, none of the other bar-goers talked about much beyond someone called Sentomaru being due to arrive and how they would have to keep their heads down for now. There was also some news from the New World. A few weeks ago, a marine flotilla had been sunk by the Yonko Shanks, and he and Whitebeard were known to have met. That was interesting, but currently not something they could act on.

Eventually, the bar began to empty, aided somewhat by the simple expedient of Shakky shouting out that anyone who collapsed into a drunken stupor would be tossed out on their rear after being shaken down for cash. Eventually, this included about half of the remaining crowd, and the rest of them started to get the hint when the old woman began to tap her watch down on the bar, wondering aloud if any of them were willing to pay the price for being the last to leave.

"She's scary, and so are the prices here," Chopper muttered to Nami, who he was sitting beside.

"I know, but both Hachi and Hancock say this is the place to meet this guy we need to talk to."

"Ah, unfortunately, my cook is also the bubble coating expert Hachi wanted to introduce you to. He's wandered off somewhere. Who knows how long it will be before he comes back," Shakky laughed as if she didn't have a care in the world. "Still, come up to the bar, Hachi vouches for you, so I'm willing to talk to you at least. But I'd really like to see who I'm talking to."

"That would depend on how well you can keep a secret," Luffy said instantly.

Shakky laughed. "I like money, but not enough to sell secrets to the marines if that's what you're concerned about. Beyond that, well, Hachi vouches for you. That's enough to let me talk to you after hours. Beyond that, you'll have to grab my attention."

Hancock started by pulling back her hood, and removing her small mask, filing at the older woman. "It has been quite some time, Shakky. And I vouch for my redheaded companion and her fellows. Everyone, this is Shakky. Where she met Hachi, I don't know, but she is an Ex-Kuja, one who left the island over ten years ago."

As Hancock spoke, the woman's eyes had widened in shock, and she stammered 'Empress!' a few times before gaining control of herself. She then looked at the two men in the crew and then back to Hancock. "I, I obviously didn't expect you to be traveling incognito. That is enough to get my help and is also for more than putting you in contact with Rayleigh whenever he returns and is... seriously surprising."

"Heh, if you think that's surprising, you'll want to sit down for a second," Luffy drawled, taking a cup of water from the bar and heating it up in a teapot. The older woman stared back at her, making no move to take her advice, and Luffy shrugged, dumping the hot water over her head.

A moment later, Luffy stood there in his male body, grimacing as he used his Quick-Change technique to replace first his pants, then his shirt. "God, why can't I ever remember this stuff chaffs when I change forms? Ugh."

The woman's jaw dropped, and her cigarette fell out of her fingers unnoticed as she stumbled back in utter astonishment. She stood there staring at the now male Luffy as he pulled his Straw Hat out of his ki space and put it on his head before grabbing at a nearby bottle of gin, staring at it then at Luffy. "I haven't had any of this yet, have I?" Luffy paused in changing his clothing to send her a grin and shook his head.

"Thought not." Shakky then threw back her head, drinking the entire thing down, as everyone watched in wide-eyed astonishment as she drank down the whole bottle without even taking it away from her lips.

"Gah, she drinks worse than Doctorine!" Chopper explained.

At his voice, the woman looked over, setting the now empty bottle on the bar in front of her as she looked at Luffy closely, then over at a few of the others, mentally stripping away their disguises now she knew what to look for. "Right, I think I'm over it now. Good grief, and here I thought I had seen everything. I know that Rayleigh will be interested in talking to you, whatever your reasons for searching him out."

She then smiled, shaking her and laughing quietly. "Still, this is amazing. The Straw Hats, a single crew with two Supernovas on it, along with Nico Robin, the Devil Child. And they are here in the company of a Shichibukai, my former Empress. That's not just interesting. That is a Grand Line-sized mystery. Especially given the timing. I don't know whether to prepare some popcorn and a glass of wine or hide in a bunker."

"We've heard the term Supernovas before, but why do I get the impression that and your 'timing' comment is the reason behind your comment there? Even above your interest in how Hancock and I came to be allied?" Luffy mused.

Shakky started at the word 'allied' and looked over at Hancock, who nodded. "Curiouser and curiouser..." the older woman murmured before shaking her head and looking back at Luffy. "You can't just let that little bomb off and expect to get out of here without giving me an explanation, yes?"

"You first," Luffy retorted cheekily.

Shakky smiled thinly and reached under the bar, pulling out a small series of bounty posters. "You think right. In case some of you don't know, the Supernovas are all rookies whose bounties have hit or exceeded a hundred million in a few months since debuting. There is you, Pirate Hunter Zoro, and then the rest. And all of them are here in the Archipelago."

That kind of momentous news should have caused people to pale. It certainly made some of the Straw Hats quail. But it didn't make them all do so, and Luffy looked over at his crew, a dangerous grin on his face, soon matched by some on theirs and a nod from Hancock. With that, Luffy turned back to Shakky, smiling. "Tell us about them. And after, we'll tell ya why Hancock and I are together. After that, we'll want to bunk out here if you don't mind."

"Sounds like a good bargain to me, oh, and if you want any drinks or food, it's on the house," Shakky said, looking over at the tiny Chopper. "From what we've heard about you Straw Hats, me and Rayleigh had decided you were good sorts anyway. Or at least amusing, and this tale between you and Hebi-hime-sama has got to be fascinating."

With that, she handed out sticks of Cotton Candy to Camie, Chopper and, surprisingly, Laki. Laki's looks caught Shakky's attention, but she shrugged her interest off after a single look and continued. "First is the only other crew with two Supernovas on it, the Kid Pirates, named after their captain. Eustass Kid, 315,000,000. He's more than a bit of a bastard, very much in the mold of the WeeGee's preferred version of a pirate, if you know what I mean. The other Supernova on the crew is named Killer, 162,000,000 beli."

Luffy rolled his eyes at that but took in the two images before pushing them over to Sanji and Zoro. "Really? Killer? How original."

"Either of them a swordsman?"

Chuckling at Zoro's question, Shakky tapped the masked image of Killer with a nod. "Him." She then went on, "The rest are solely captains. Scratchman Apoo, On Air Pirates, 198,000,000 beli. Jewelry Bonney Captain of the Bonney Pirates, 140,000,000 beli. Urouge Captain of the Fallen Monk Pirates, 108,000,000. Trafalgar Law, 200,000,000 beli. And as I said, all of them are here."

Luffy, Sanji and Luffy gazed at the photos while Nami asked for a map of the Archipelago. She, Hancock, Sonia and Franky dominated the discussion for some time while Brook moved up behind Luffy, playing a brief note on his violin. "Well, now, isn't this all interesting, Luffy? Or should I still call you Ranko-san? YOHOHOHO!"

"Heh. Luffy for the rest of the night. But yeah. With all these big egos here and the general atmosphere of the Archipelago, it's like a sack of gunpowder, just waiting for a match." Luffy looked up at the rest of his crew, the conversation around Shakky trailing off as all of them felt his eyes on them, with Hancock staring back with a smile on her face. "The plan is still on, folks. We owe Shakky here an explanation tonight. But tomorrow, folks, we're gonna be that spark..."

End Chapter

Well, there you have it everyone, the start of the Archipelago Arc. An arc that will have a lot of surprises, I hope, and a heap ton of action. As well as a bit of romance as Hancock and Luffy talk to one another about their attraction to one another. I hope you enjoyed it, and look forward to the next one in July if it wins the poll.