

Ain't named Oda or Rumiko.

So here is *Stallion of the Line*, the small story winner from August. I know it's out late, but I wanted at least one of my One Piece editors to look at it, and RL happens to the best of us. It has now been edited, and I hope that you all enjoy it, even if it's kind of light on the Raffy combat side of things.

This has been edited by Tomon and Hiryo now, along with Grammarly. Without their help this chapter, in particular the heart-to-heart talks, would not be nearly as good.

## Chapter 22: Eating Crow and Slicing Foxes

After the amusingly bumpy start, the octopus-balloon ride became smooth sailing, the *Resolve* slowly descending towards the very, very, very distant waters. So distant at the moment that they couldn't be seen due to the clouds between the ship and the Blue Sea far below. The ship was obviously under the control of wind and octopus at present and there was little to nothing that Luffy could do about it. So Luffy simply sat on the prow of the ship, staring ahead and all around them, taking in the amazing view.

Nearby, Chopper was pushing Makino in her wheelchair around the deck, letting the green-haired woman take in the scenery. As she did, Makino's face showed a confusing mix of horror at how high they were, and amazement at the vista set out around them. The marines too, even Hina, were simply watching the view. But Makino still suffered from her fear of heights, and looking at her, Luffy knew she was close to losing it.

Seeing that, Luffy left off his sightseeing and moved over to Makino, getting behind her chair. "Speaking of views, you haven't been on the *Resolve* since we began the repairs, have you? Let me show you the downstairs too. We made a lot of changes down there as well and with more on the way."

"On the way, is it?" Makino murmured, twisting her upper body around slightly to look at her captain, eyes latching onto the electrical scars that marred Luffy's forearms now, knowing they were a few of several scattered around his body. Makino had been unconscious most of the battle against Enel but had heard what Luffy had done to give the people of Sky Island a chance to escape after Chopper and Conis had forced them to admit that 'God' was going to kill them all since she had woken up.

The first area she saw, of course, was the kitchen. Instead of having the original captain's cabin be the dining area and the actual kitchen down below, Luffy and the Skypieans had worked together to shift the kitchen up into the built-up aft area of the schooner. Indeed, most of the kitchen appliances had been entirely replaced by dial-based ones, with many more appliances added to what had been there originally.

Makino was curious and very interested in the collection of new appliances that Sanji was even now using to prep a meal. The older woman hadn't been inside Conis' house, unlike the cook and the others, since Makino had been away with Nami on the Waver and then boarded the Resolve with the other people interested in Upper Yard. So, all of the dial appliances were new to her, and she spent several minutes exclaiming about one or the other. The large refrigerator and freezers built around cold dials, which were the opposite of a heat dial and one of many the Skypieans created through various means instead of being found in nature, were amazing to her. "With that, we won't have nearly as much trouble storing fresh food! Amazing!"

"Oh, your words about my new equipment bring me such joy, Makino-chan!" Sanji swooned as he danced around Makino where she was sitting in her wheelchair in front of the freezer. "Rest assured, my lady, that I will create for you, a meal most excellent soon enough!" he exclaimed this last while affecting some kind of accent, which caused Luffy to start and look at him in horror. *Please, no, I so do not need to be reminded of that French Frog!*

The others in the room just laughed. This included two of the Marines who were eager to use their time aboard this ship to learn some of Sanji's tricks of the trade. Most marine cooks specialized in quick and easy meals. The taste was secondary to quantity and nutrition. But they had seen Sanji cook just as easily for a massive party as the small pirate crew and never had he forgotten nutrition or taste.

Looking at the cook make heart-eyes at Makino, Laki smirked and decided to get a dig in on the blonde man. "I thought you spent last night in bed with that Skypiean, Conis? And here you are, flirting with Makino. So was Conis, what, your latest conquest? Are you one of those pirates who has a girl in every port?"

Although she smirked at the chef, there was a certain amount of steel in her voice as well. After all, her father had apparently been that kind of pirate. And he had left her mother in the family way, which had not made for an easy life for the woman.

"This is the first I've heard of it," Makino exclaimed, rearing back in her wheelchair to stare at Sanji.

She wasn't alone in this. Zoro, who had been drinking ale in one corner, gaped at Sanji in shock. "You mean to say the Aho-Cook actually got some?! The end of the world is nigh!"

Sanji took a couple puffs on his cigarette, flicking the ash in Zoro's direction, shaking his head. "That was a remarkably poor taunt. It's obvious you have lost your ability with words out of jealousy. And as for your insinuation Laki-chan," Sanji looked over at her, bowing from the waist. "Conis and I were indeed a momentary item. Both of us knew it wouldn't go anywhere, and I was very upfront with the fact that I wasn't willing to stay with her, that I would sail with the rest of my crew."

Luffy reflected that Sanji had handled that pretty much as well as he could, both the allegation and Conis. Luffy still wasn't exactly happy with the idea of taking affection like that where you could find it, but he wasn't going to tell Sanji it was wrong or anything. It just wasn't Luffy's own cup of tea. When Zoro looked to him for confirmation, Luffy nodded. "Yep, I found him in bed with Conis this morning. Kicking him out of bed was hilarious, gotta say."

While Sanji scowled at that, Zoro let loose a chuckle. He was still a little shocked that the over-the-top Love Cook had actually found someone who responded to his 'suave' ways. *Damn it, I'm going to have to shift my entire taunting assault because of this. More mentions of his status as number 3 in the bounty list, maybe? Definitely more taunting about his looks. And I suppose I don't need to cast aside all my taunts about his being an aho-cook, just keep it more general.*

Makino, however, was more concerned with the end results of Sanji's promiscuity than the fact Sanji had proven to be up to Zoro's nickname for him. "Well, in that case, I suppose it's alright, so long as you didn't 'Dear Jane' her, and remembered to do your part so that nothing untoward occurred afterward..." Makino reached out faster than most there could track and was suddenly pinching at Sanji's side with glowing black fingers, digging in and forcing him to bend over her chair in pain as she hissed, "You did use protection, right?"

"Hah! That's the same question I asked when I found him too," Luffy laughed.

"Too damn right," Zoro cut in, having recovered from his shock. "The last thing this world needs is a miniature curly-browed Aho-cook."

His dignity somewhat in tatters, Sanji answered in the affirmative. He had even gone to one of the local doctors for a morning-after pill for Conis.

Makino nodded in approval at that, then began to mutter under her breath, a dark, horrible aura beginning to emanate from her. "Well, that's good. And you never led her on too, or got her drunk, or left without saying anything to her, only leaving a letter professing your love... RGHHGGGHh...."

Shuddering and recoiling, Sanji desperately looked around for some other topic to talk about, one that didn't remind Makino of Shanks or her own status as a jilted lover. He thought he spotted one as Sanji noticed Luffy looking around the kitchen speculatively, stroking his pigtail in a way that told Sanji and the rest of the crew he was thinking deep thoughts. "What are you thinking about, Luffy?"

"I..." Luffy looked over at him, frowning a little as he looked over at Zoro. "You've been around the ship since we set sail, right?" Zoro nodded. The two of them had been part of the final inspection and hadn't found anything out of the ordinary. But Zoro, as the first mate, had done another walk-around after the ship had entered the White-White Sea.

Luffy frowned further, tapping a finger lightly on one wall, as he stared at the wall for some reason before closing his eyes. Zoro felt something then and narrowed his own eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Using my Kenbunshoku. Somethings off..." he muttered, now scratching at his pigtail instead of just pulling at it. "Or maybe that octopus is messing my ability up somehow?"

Shaking his head, Luffy looked around and noticed that the two Marines had gone outside, laden with food. Everyone else was leaving to eat outside as well, to better enjoy the view, with Chopper pushing Makino outside too. The green-haired woman wasn't happy about being so high up, but so long as she couldn't look directly down and see precisely how high they were, Makino felt she would be fine.

Shrugging, he, Sanji and Zoro joined them, only to pause and look in confusion at Laki, who was sitting on the deck instead of the Island Cloud seats arrayed around the masts. "Why're you sitting on the deck?" Zoro questioned as he passed Laki.

She shrugged. "Those are cloud seats, right? Made of Island Cloud?" When Zoro nodded, she looked over the side of the ship at the view as the Resolve continued to slowly drift downward. "So I'm wondering... well, Island Cloud is only formed at a certain height, right? So what happens to the Island Cloud when it's brought further down from that altitude?"

Luffy winced, looking at the seats and then shrugging. *I think I'll trust my reflexes if it comes to it.* With that, he sat down on the nearest sofa-like circular chair, leaning back against the mast. "Well, then it's a good thing we kept all the old bedding and stuff."

The pirates had never gotten rid of the extra hammocks and mattresses from when the Resolve had been a marine vessel.

Hina, who had been at the back of the vessel with Chopper talking about the wounded among her men, those men who had been injured but not bedridden by their wounds, joined them at that point. Indeed, everyone bar two of the pirates were there now and Hina looked around in confusion. "Where are Nami and Robin? I would have thought Sanji would have rushed to tell them about lunch before most of you lot. Hina confused."

"Ah, but I did, Hina-chan!" Sanji danced around Hina, bowing her onto a seat, while Fullbody and the other marines glared daggers at him. "However, Nami-chwan told me they would be busy talking for a little while. Girl Talk, I was told."

Luffy carefully hid a wince at that, as every other man there just nodded and turned to their food. Even Hina and Laki took it at face value, while Makino's eyes narrowed in suspicion. *Yeah, that is probably not going to be a fun conversation. I just hope I was right about Nami's reaction.*

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From the moment the Resolve's descent had settled down, Robin had turned her attention to more personal matters, only to find that it had not been difficult to pigeonhole Nami at all. She had merely indicated she wanted Nami's help with something in her room, and Nami agreed.

The moment the door closed behind them, Nami was on her knees, bowing her head deeply to Robin from that position. "I am so sorry! I, I know that Luffy told you what I tried to do, and I am **so** sorry for it! I, I don't honestly know what I was thinking. It was like, like I just wanted to, to win somehow, but didn't care that other people would be hurt if I did, didn't even think about it. And worse, I completely forgot to treat Luffy as a person instead of some kind of prize."

Staring at the girl, Robin gave a slight internal nod towards her boyfriend's perspicacity and ability to read people. Luffy had predicted that Nami would be the one to apologize, although Robin doubted that he had realized how heartfelt it would be. Indeed, the heartfelt nature of it, and the fact Nami looked to be on the verge of tears, drowned out Robin's small bit of anger at what the younger girl had attempted. Setting that aside, Robin locked the door behind her, then moved around Nami, and sat on her cot leaning against the interior bulkhead behind her cot's head, gesturing Nami off the floor to sit at the other end.

There Nami leaned against the back wall looking at her, her face showing that she was now either close to crying or close to running away. *I wonder how much of that is my reputation and abilities, and how much of it is the discussion we're going to be having?*

"Before I accept your apology, and I do realize that you mean it Nami, can I ask if you knew Luffy and I were together, why did you try so desperately to as you put it, 'race ahead of me?' While I have known that you use your body occasionally to elicit a reaction and were used to doing so as part of your normal thieving operations or to just get out of trouble, this was entirely beyond that line. Would you really have gone through with going that far that quickly?"

"I, I don't know..." Nami answered, looking down at the cot then up at Robin. "I just, whenever I thought about Luffy in the past few days it felt like my mind would just shut down, and I focused on only one thing, I just wanted to make him **MINE**."

"Why were you so desperate?" Robin continued questioning, her words a scalpel. At the moment, she wasn't going to go into her own hurt feelings or Luffy's, not yet. Right now, she just wanted Nami to figure out why she had acted like that. "Walk me through the mental process."

Nami looked at her quizzically, then, seeing Robin was serious, sighed. "I've never been good at the whole emotions thing," she muttered, before frowning in thought. "Well, for one thing, I saw you two that night at the party in the forest. I had kind of suspected something might be going on since Jaya, and I knew I was jealous of how close the two of you seemed to be occasionally. But when I saw the two of you together like that, I thought it was hot as hell, that **Luffy** was hot as hell. I realized then that the two of you were in a relationship. And then I realized that I wanted Luffy too."

She scowled, rubbing at her arms. "Looking back on it, I, my thoughts were all over the place, and I, I was just really confused as to what I wanted to do. I thought I might be willing to share at one point, but when Luffy saved me from Enel, I stopped thinking about that idea at all. It wasn't the first time Luffy had saved me, you know? He saved me, my village, my sister, my everything from Arlong and his pirate crew. And I thought he's always coming to my rescue. He's like my, my Prince on a white horse, you know! And I just wanted him to be mine so badly."

At that, Robin hid a smile behind one hand that was wholly inappropriate at the moment. The idea of Luffy as a knight on a white stallion was somehow amusing to her, especially since he had confessed to her at one point that he could race any horse you could name into the ground.

Nami didn't notice this as she continued with her self-flagellation. She wasn't normally the most introspective woman, but Nami realized she had to do so now. "I think at that point I fell into old habits. I was a thief, you know, I stole from pirates and marines and at times just rich assholes. I didn't really care much who I hurt in the process, what happened afterward. My eyes were on the prize, the prize of saving my village at the time. This time, my eyes were on Luffy and I wanted him. But with you so far ahead, I thought I had to, to jump ahead of you to get Luffy."

Every time Nami talked about getting Luffy she looked a little more ill, and Robin nodded slowly. When she spoke, she did so slowly, choosing her words carefully. "I also believe that it was an attempt to regain control."

"What do you mean?" Nami replied, confused. "Erm, I mean, gain control over Luffy, maybe, but I've never been in control of him in the first place so..."

"No, not control of Luffy but over yourself. You're not the only one who had a horrible childhood, Nami." Robin smiled sadly at that, shaking her head. "Recall that I earned a bounty when I was but eight years old. After that point, I was forced to fend for myself. I always had to stay ahead of the Marines. I was always in danger of being betrayed. And one thing I learned early on was that you had to control yourself and everything around you to a certain extent to survive. You were the same, I think."

The older woman had made that last point a question, and Nami slowly rocked back and forth, occasionally bumping her head very deliberately against the bulkhead behind her. "I... I think you're right about that. Whenever I was on a caper, I was always looking for ways to eliminate random things or to use them to my advantage. Even my body, I was the one in control of it. I was the one who set the limits, who figured out the best way to use my body in this situation or that situation, always hinting, never going past a certain line, always with a ready argument at hand if someone got pushy."

"And did anyone get past that last ready argument?" Robin questioned, looking at the younger girl compassionately. With what Nami had attempted to do in regards to Luffy, this might have seemed unusual, but Robin honestly had not felt any concern about Nami attempting to get between her and Luffy. Anger and hurt at Nami's actions but that had started fading when Nami began with her initial apology.

Nami shivered and shook her head. "There, there were two close calls. But, like I said, I always had a secret ace up my sleeve and, more often than not, a getaway plan."

"Good for you." Robin sent the girl an approving smile at that, before shifting her face to something more serious. "But you see where I'm going with this, don't you? Emotions are inherently uncontrollable. Do you think when I first met your crew that I thought I would ever become part of it? Or worse yet, become romantically entangled with your captain?"

"So, so it's a real relationship then? It's not just physical?" Nami asked, looking even more guilty, which was part of why Robin was using herself as an example.

But the honest curiosity in the other girl's voice made what could have been a very rude question into a simple inquiry, so Robin nodded. "Indeed. It is. I never intended to enter this relationship, but Luffy got under my defenses back in Alabasta, and before I knew it, I was involved. I cannot say that we are deeply in love already or something of that nature. I am not so romantically soppy as that, but I have to admit that this is perhaps only the second relationship in my life where I can say that the emotions matter as much as the physicality. Luffy, he is important to me, and that is the easiest way to put it."

"Whereas I **knew** the romance was there and decided to push the physicality up as far as I could to gain control of the relationship, assuming there would be one in the first place!" Nami growled, smacking her head even harder against the bulkhead behind her.

A hand appeared on the wall, catching the back of Nami's head and holding it still. "Be careful, we all need all the brain cells we can get after all," Robin joked, before becoming again more serious. The quick changes of the older woman's attitude towards her were throwing Nami off-balance, something Robin wanted to capitalize on. "Can I ask you something else before we continue this emotional tangent?"

When Nami nodded, Robin posed her question. "Are you attracted to Luffy's female form?"

"Are you?" Nami instantly riposted, although the question had surprised her.

"Surprisingly, yes. I've never been with a woman before, but I think a part of that might simply be the dearth of women pirates. I know I enjoy watching Luffy move regardless of his form. It reminds me of watching a cat for some reason, all poise and control. His form doesn't really matter much in that consideration. So yes, his female form interests me, and the two of us have kissed in that form several times. Indeed, the night you found us intertwined began with Luffy in his female body. Does his female form interest you as well?"

"... No. At least... no. I've never caught myself looking at Luffy's female form in the same way I know I've checked him out in his normal body..." Nami replied slowly, sagging a little. "And that's a major problem, isn't it?"

"Correct. To be with Luffy, you would at least have to be attracted to the female form. And as you say, I certainly haven't noticed any indication in that direction from you before. And what you were describing earlier, that isn't love, Nami. That was a crush. Do you know the difference between a crush and love? It's in all the books about teenage love and romance."

"I've never been a big reader of that kind of thing," Nami said uncomfortably, looking as if she wanted to be angry at the other girl for thinking that she didn't really have that emotional connection to Luffy. But knowing what she had done, Nami knew she couldn't get angry at the older woman.

"The difference between love and a crush is when you are in love with someone, you automatically take their feelings and needs into account. You put yourself in their shoes, ask yourself how they would react to this or that action. You think about what can you do to make them happier about something? A crush, on the other hand, is much simpler. 'I like this person so he must be mine,' which is what you were describing," Robin stated quickly, like someone tearing off a bandage, watching the comment hit home. "He's protected me, he's defended me, he's hot, we have so much in common, we belong together and I don't care who I hurt to make that a reality!"

Throughout this last bit, Robin had mimicked a young girl's tone of voice, high-end and almost squeaking, and Nami was torn between laughing and becoming furious. Before she could decide which way to go, Robin continued, her voice returning to its normal deep, sensual register.

"Love is not a crush. A crush can lead to love at times, or it can get in its way. I don't think you're in love with Luffy. I think you have a massive crush on him or had before he rejected you and made you wake up to how you were treating him. And who could blame you?"



You mentioned the knight on the white stallion trope, and that wouldn't in point of fact be a trope if it wasn't so understandable. But love is something different."

"I thought you and Luffy weren't in love," Nami protested feebly, her emotions and thoughts in a whirl.

"That's not exactly what I said, and I don't have to have finished the dance in the past to know all the steps now. Not with all the books I've read. As for you, do you know what Luffy's favorite color is? His favorite food? The topic of conversation beyond the Art?" Robin questioned rapid-fire.

"Blue, I think, anything you put in front of him, and adventures..." Nami began strongly before trailing off, frowning uncomfortably.

"Actually, No. Luffy's favorite color is black, for a quintessentially boy reason. 'Black goes with everything, so it makes dressing easier,'" Robin quoted drolly.

Nami laughed at that, and the hand which was still pushing her head away from the wall patted her shoulder companionably before disappearing as Robin went on, pleased that the girl was not only listening but actually thinking about what she was being told. *An ounce of humor makes the medicine go down far better*, Robin reflected. *All those books about teenage romances, self-help books and so on are coming in handy right now.*

"Food is simpler still, salmon of any kind, even what he calls sushi, something I've only tried twice before joining the crew. And his favorite conversation beyond the Art isn't actually adventuring. Oddly enough, he and I have had several conversations about stargazing and sightseeing. Traveling is its own reward for Luffy, not just the adventure aspect, but seeing new sights."

Nami made a disbelieving noise, and Robin shrugged. "Given his general attitude and his dedication to training, it is somewhat strange to know that Luffy has hidden depths, but it certainly made for some interesting discussions." *And some of the things he mentions in those discussions hint at far more than he might realize. There is a mystery about Luffy, and that is almost as titillating as the rest of the package.*

Robin leaned forward, placing one of her real hands on Nami's knee, squeezing it gently. "Do you understand what I'm saying? You were not acting out of love for Luffy. You were acting on a crush. A desire to own someone, to make them yours and yours alone."

"I, I can see that. I, Luffy woke me up to the fact that I was treating him like a prize last night. I just..." Nami paused, taking a deep breath, forcing herself to admit her mistakes squarely. "I should've realized it. If I was willing to really be with Luffy the person, the friend, I would've been willing to try the slow play. Even trying to share him with you would be better instead of trying to take Luffy for myself. That way, everyone could be happy, maybe. Instead,

like Luffy told you last night, and you just pointed out, I saw him as a thing, as something like a prize to be stolen from you. Not only did I wrong him, I wronged you and for that, I am deeply sorry."

Robin exhaled slowly, pushing down her own lingering anger at the young woman's actions. "In that case, I accept your apology. You, you did hurt me trying this, but I think not nearly as much as you hurt Luffy. As such, you have to apologize to Luffy as well, telling him your reasoning. Then you have to show you can move past your crush, to let it die and to keep being part of his crew."

Nami flinched again, and Robin reached over to squeeze her knee. Robin shook her head. "It has to be done, and the sooner, the better, lest it fester between the two of you."

At that, Nami leaned back, thinking about the revelations that Robin's words had forced her mind to go through over the past few minutes as she shook her head in wonder. "You're right," her voice firmed, and she stood up resolutely. "You're right. I, I screwed up by the numbers! I knew that already but knowing why makes it even more obvious how much I screwed up. And it's on me to get past this."

*Maturity can come upon us at the strangest times*, Robin reflected, as she watched Nami throw off the anger at being called out about the nature of her shallow emotions towards Luffy, and the reasoning behind her hasty actions. *She'll get through this, I think, and become all the stronger or at least more self-aware.*

"In that case, I'll call Luffy, and you can give our captain your apology now." With that, Robin closed her eyes, sending out a few eyes along the passageway until she found Luffy up on the main deck, after which she created a mouth next to Luffy's ear, whispering that she and Nami wanted to talk to him in her room.

As she was doing this, Nami gasped, turning to her, looking almost panicky. "Wait! I'm not ready for this right away! I need some time to, to prepare to..."

"One never it is to eat crow," Robin shrugged philosophically, a small ignoble part of her enjoying the younger girl's sudden panic. "I wager the taste and texture of it does not change, ready or not."

Nami grimaced but seeing no way out of it, firmed her shoulders as she began to pace around the small cabin, turning as a knock sounded on Robin's door.

Luffy opened the door when he heard Robin telling him to come in. As he walked in, he looked at Nami, then over at Robin and back again. Then he made a point of looking around, nodding in approval. "Well, I don't see any blood on the walls or deck, and both of you seem to be in one piece, heh, I tell a funny. So I suppose that's a plus. And how did your conversation go?"

The teasing and not at all confrontational tone from Luffy caused Nami to calm down, and she grabbed her courage with both hands and began her apology. And once she began, the words poured out of her, forced by Nami's newly-forged self-awareness. Nami spoke about how she had been acting on a crush. How she had thought that was love, never having felt love or having had a crush before and then explaining how Luffy saving her from Enel had pushed her over the edge, wanting him, desiring to own him. And finally, Nami explained how Luffy's reaction last night, and Robin's talk today had made her realize all of this.

Nami finished by bowing from the waist so deeply her hair obscured her face for a moment. "And I am so sorry! You're not just my personal hero, you're also my captain and my friend, and I shouldn't have forgotten those things in my rush to own this image of you that I had created. I shouldn't have tried to steal you away like that, unmindful of the hurt I would cause."

Luffy looked at her silently, evaluating. Looking back on it, Luffy was pretty certain that was the same kind of thinking that Ukyo, maybe Akane, Shampoo, and, most particularly, Kodachi had been guilty of back in his old dimension. Either they had never begun to see him as a person, or they had simply started to see him as a prize to be won, a thing rather than an individual with his own hopes and dreams. They had this image of him, and basically ignored everything beyond that image as not real.

But unlike them, Nami was more than smart enough to realize what she had done wrong and also empathic enough to see it as wrong. Luffy had been able to tell that she had been genuinely sorry for how she had acted, not just the fact that it had failed, which was a very important distinction. *That, and I'm a lot closer to Nami, hell to this entire crew than I ever was to anyone in my old life except my mom.*

With that in mind, Luffy reached out and ruffled Nami's hair. "I accept your apology, and I hope we can move past this. My faith in you as my navigator never changed, and this apology, the fact that I can tell it was really heartfelt, makes me think we can definitely remain friends too."

Nami nearly sagged in relief that, smiling tremulously at Luffy. Luffy nodded to her, looked over to Robin, winked, and then exited, heading outside with a final comment tossed over his shoulder. "Beyond that, it is a way too lovely to stay inside today, girls. Why don't you join the rest of us out on the deck? Sanji's put out some food for us all, and the view is amazing. We might want to get as much use out of those Island Clouds seats as we can before they go bang."

"Wait, what?" Nami blinked, looking after Luffy, then smacked her forehead. "Of course! The air pressure!"

"Oh dear, I am now very happy that Zoro did not listen to my suggestion about getting rid of the old beds," Robin murmured, looking down at her own. She had been one of the few

to switch entirely to an Island Cloud mattress, having become somewhat enamored of them all in their time up in sky island.

Nami giggled at her expense, but held out a hand to the older woman, pulling her to her feet. Then she asked quietly, "Do you really think we'll be able to go back to the way we were?"

"You and Luffy? For his part, yes. What about you?"

Nami looked away towards the doorway, remembering Luffy ruffling her hair just now, and the smirk on his face. "Yes. I, I think I can do that. At least I'm going to do my damndest to put this behind us all. Both for him and for you, Robin."

"Good. Now, tell me," Robin began, turning away from her and moving towards the small but extremely full wardrobe laid against the inner bulkhead. She then turned, holding out two swimsuits, of the same cut, both bikinis, but kind of conservative ones, but with added bits on here and there. "Purple, or dark umber?"

Nami laughed, and the girls had a fun time picking out which bathing suits to wear, putting aside the deeply emotional conversation with relief.

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"And what were you up to?" Makino asked, looking over at Luffy from a game of chess she was playing with Chopper, while nearby Hina was putting the marines through their paces with a training scenario.

"Er, Robin wanted to get me to help her replace her bed, she heard Laki's concerns about the Island Cloud popping at low altitudes."

"And where is Nami?" Makino went on as if Luffy hadn't spoken, turning to give Luffy a piercing look.

"Dunno," Luffy lied brusquely, turning away before the scarily insightful Makino could grill him further.

When the two missing ladies came up onto the deck, Sanji was rescued from expelling himself off the ship via a burst of blood from his nose by a fast-acting Luffy, who hopped into the air and caught him before he could get too far, blushing hotly himself as he tried to tear his eyes away from Robin as she moved around the deck, looking out over the vista around the Resolve in a dark umber bathing suit, with golden loops stuck into the sides of the bottom

portion of the bikini, and the topmost bikini closed at her back by another. Both bits consisted of enough material to cover everything they should, but that hardly mattered when Robin was the one wearing it.

Hina took one look at them, then looked over at Makino, one eyebrow rising challengingly. The older woman laughed, and with Hina pushing Makino's wheelchair, the two of them quickly entered the Resolve, heading down to Makino's room. Moments later, they came back with equally daring outfits to the other two women.

Needless to say, the rest of that day was a very nice one for all the men aboard the pirate ship.

The ship continued to drift gently towards the distant Blue Sea for the rest of the day and into the evening, which was just as magnificent a sight as the rest of the day had been. Before evening though, the ship passed the point where the Sky Cloud chairs and mattresses couldn't survive the air pressure. With, alas, somewhat predictable results...

Nami and the girls were still laid out on the back of the ship, just taking it easy. The view was great, the sun was shining, and it was a perfect time to just take it easy, read a book, have some quiet time in the sun.

The marines, those able to move, were all down on the main deck, also lazing around, looking after their weapons or just sitting and taking it easy. Hina was in no mood to force them to train at present, having borrowed a book from Makino and enjoying some downtime of her own. Of all the girls, she'd had the least downtime up in Sky Island. She found it rather galling to be so laid back while surrounded by pirates, but just for this one moment, Hina felt she could let that concern go for a bit.

Elsewhere, Chopper and Zoro were training. Zoro had been ordered by Luffy to start training Chopper's upper body in terms of strength for an hour every day, while Luffy would continue his work of teaching the Zoan user on different combat styles. Luffy, for his part, was sitting on an Island cloud chair, working on putting together another bookcase for Robin at her request. Somehow the woman had come up with five history books of some kind on Sky Island, and the floor of her room was once more looking far too cluttered.

Fullbody and Sanji were nearby, having been forced to take their latest bout of fighting to the card table. A few of the other marines and Laki, who had no interest in sunbathing at present, were with them.

As he felt something shift within his chair, Luffy frowned, looking down at it. The sides distended for a second, and Luffy's eyes widened as he realized what this had to be. Leaping to his feet, he shouted, "They're gonna blow!" at the top of his lungs.

At the shout, everyone looked up at him as the women on the aft deck looked at one another in confusion. But before anyone could realize what Luffy what meant, the Island Cloud chairs all across the main deck started to explode. They burst with all the power of similarly scaled balloons filled with helium, sending blasts of air and gas everywhere. Thankfully that was all they did, the cloud stuff coming apart as quickly as it burst.

Nearly all of the marines were hurled out of their chairs, tossed this way and that smacking into things or just sent sprawling. Luffy was able to keep his feet but was sent stumbling almost into Chopper and Zoro.

Chopper had been so frightened by the sudden loud blasts of sound that he had reverted to his smaller form and now clung to Zoro's face with a death grip, clinging there even as Zoro tried to pull him off. The fact Zoro had lost his footing and now found himself entangled with Luffy was not helping matters.

The women on the aft deck all saw this and leaped off their own lounge chairs, Robin quickly leaning back down and pulling Makino up and off the green-haired woman's chair with Nami quickly coming to her aid. No sooner had they shifted the woman off the Island Cloud lounge chair that the series of chairs all around the aft deck burst in turn. "Well, that was close," Makino observed weakly, looking from where Robin was holding her in her arms with difficulty down to the chaos on the main deck.

Getting up from where she had rolled away from the nearest Island Cloud chair, Laki pushed herself to her feet, staring morosely at her crushed cigarette, smirking at how Fullbody and Sanji had been hurled off their chairs practically face-first into one another. "See? I told you so. There was a reason why none of you had seen examples of Island Cloud before this."

Shaking her head, Nami moved to the railing and shouted down at Sanji. "Sanji-kun, be a dear and get out our old lounge chairs, please?"

"Right away, Nami-swan!" Sanji chirped, leaping to his feet, ignoring the embarrassing pose he'd just been locked in with Fullbody to head inside as the sprawled marines tried to gather their scattered wits.

Staring at the wooden platform built out of the masts to carry the Island cloud mattresses, Luffy sighed. "I'll go with you. I don't think we should let those chairs go to waste, so let's see if I can make them into cabinets for weapons and if we have enough mattresses to make up more cushions."

That evening, having eaten another Sanji-made meal mere moments ago, Luffy was looking up at the bottom of the giant squid above the ship, while Zoro was talking to Laki about maybe enlarging the crow's nest and placing a gun up there. "I mean, look at it." Zoro gestured around them, very deliberately smacking Luffy on the back of the head with one hand to illustrate his point. We don't even have enough space up here for three people to stand

comfortably. But we're so much higher from the rest of the ship if we had some kind of gun up here, it might be a good idea."

"And would give you even more of an excuse to stay up here and nap the day away, claiming you were 'on guard', Zoro," Luffy snarked.

Zoro rolled his eyes. "Bah, like I'd need another reason to nap. And you shouldn't talk, considering your training's the reason why I need all the rest I can get."

"Hah, you expect me to fall for that? You were sleeping every chance you got long before we started training together!"

Ignoring the byplay, Laki nodded, leaning over the side of the crow's nest perilously, actually kicking off the floor of the crow's nest with 1 foot and balancing over the side of the bucket-like area as she stared down at the mast. "I think we might have to reinforce the mast a little bit more than we already have if we want to put something major up here, like another cannon. And frankly, the recoil of those things would be a reason not to even try. But if you're talking a large sniper rifle or something like that, something that has more range than real stopping power, I think I can do something about that. Link that with my idea about superfast impact bullets? Nothing heat dial related will have that kind of range. But with enough charged impact dials combined, tilted so that they are all hitting the same area, perhaps..."

She flipped back upright, looking around them, scowling a little. "I don't know," she admitted. "I think we're coming up to the limits of dial mechanics. I'm not saying it can't be done, but it would take a lot of experimentation on top of what I've done to my own rifle over the past few days. The range wasn't my priority there. And now that we are away from Sky Island, you have to remember that the dials we have are the only dials we're going to have unless we turn around and head back up there somehow."

"Yeah, no," Luffy said, still staring up at the octopus cocking his head thoughtfully to one side. "I don't think Log Poses can be made to work that way, and the only way we know to get up there was a lot of trouble. And that was with us just nailing it in terms of timing. Conserve them as much as you think you can. Zoro's little project is very definitely a side-project in comparison to giving the Resolve more main firepower."

"How did you all come up to the White Sea, anyway?" Laki asked.

"The Knock Up Stream," Zoro and Luffy answered as one.

"What?!" Laki gasped, staring at both men in shock. "And your whole crew survived?!"

"Our crew did, the Marines weren't so lucky. More importantly, do you think you can turn one of those breath dials to point upwards?" Luffy questioned, pointing over the side of the crow's nest and down to one of the aforementioned dials. Massive things, they were the

largest dials that the Straw Hats had taken aboard while on Sky Island, only challenged by the Jet Dials they had hidden below the water line taken from the Maxim. The breath dials were intended to blow into the sails to provide wind on the days when the weather was not cooperating.

"I certainly can, that's a simple angle change. Why?" Laki trailed off as she too looked upwards at the giant octopus balloon. "Don't tell me..."

"I think it's shrinking," Luffy nodded.

Without another word, Laki jumped over the side of the crow's nest, using her skate-based Breath Dials to quickly descend, bouncing through the air twice before she was on the deck. There she swiftly moved to the central breath dial, turning it on its mount to stick straight upwards.

Zoro and Luffy both twitched as the blast of air blew past them. But it seemed to work as the balloon stopped shrinking. "Hey, Chopper! We need your language skills!"

At his captain's shout, Chopper looked up from where he had been idly munching on a salad of some kind that Sanji had made as part of the evening meal, staring up at the crow's nest, and then over to where Laki had just finished re-clamping the breath dial down. Nodding, he transformed into his human form and climbed up the rigging quickly before shrinking down to sit on the side of the crow's nest, shouting out, "What's wrong Octopus Balloon? Why are you shrinking?"

From above, there came a series of rumbles and clicking noises, the octopus's beak not being visible from the amount the rest of its body which had puffed up but obviously still there somehow. Nodding, Chopper turned to Zoro and Luffy, adopting an almost feminine voice, as he told them, "It's the pressure you see, the air is a bit heavier down here, and it's pushing me all out of sorts. Even with that air thing you just used, it's only a matter of time before I shrink. It always happens, that's why no one on the Blue Sea knows about my species, we just become regular octopuses until we eventually find a way back up to the White Sea."

Wondering about the mechanics of that journey, Luffy became lost in thought for a moment before Zoro smacked him on the side of the head. "Focus captain. Anyway, we can slow that down? Getting another one of the breath dials over here? Or moving that one closer, so the stream that's hitting the octopus is stronger?"

Again, there were a series of classics and whistles from above. "It's worth a try, I don't know, this is a first for me too, you know!"

"No, we didn't know that, and it doesn't really fill me with confidence, but it wasn't like we had a choice in what octopus balloon to use. It wasn't like buying a ship or anything."



“Seeing as we’ve never actually done that, I’m not certain that’s a comparison we pirates can use,” Zoro laughed, even as he leaped over the side of the crow’s nest to inform the rest of the crew what was going on.

Fifteen minutes after that, while Laki and Chopper were setting up one of the secondary breath dials on the other side of the mast from the first pointing upwards, one of the marines looked over the side of the ship. They hadn’t been told to help and had just been sitting around for the most part, looking at what was going on and being afraid of what might happen if the octopus balloon let them go a little too high over the Blue Sea. But that look over the side filled the low-ranging marine with hope. “Ocean ho!”

Everyone who wasn’t busy with the dials ran to the sides of the ship, staring downwards, delighted to see that their airborne journey was at an end.

It was a very good thing that it was too. Before the second dial could be activated in its new position, there was a chitter from the octopus above the ship, and Chopper shouted out, “The octopus can’t take anymore! It’s shrinking!”

As everyone else watched, the octopus released portions of the ship’s from its tentacles, and not a second later, shrunk dramatically, going from its full size to that of a regular octopus in size a second later. It was then blown up and back of the ship by the breath dial that had been previously helping it stay in the air.

For a moment, the ship sort of hung in midair, and then plummeted precisely like a very streamlined yet not at all aerodynamic ship would through the air. But it didn’t tumble, the keel kept firmly facing downwards, and the ship didn’t tilt one way or the other. Luffy saw to this through the subtle use of the other jet dials they had installed under the waterline but didn’t use them to slow the ship down overmuch.

That kind of thing was bound to be noticed, and the dials were too good a resource to let the marines find out about them. Luffy trusted Hina to keep her word and the secrets Luffy had demanded the commodore keep. That didn’t mean she wasn’t going to tell her superiors everything else she could.

Thankfully it was a very, very short ride down to the ocean, where they landed with a crash and a massive splash of water blasting upwards, the blowback of which caught Luffy on the aft deck and a few of the marines who had been forward by the prow. One of them was nearly hurled overboard, but Zoro caught his ankle and dragged him back aboard.

Makino screamed as her wheelchair went sideways, but found herself propped upwards, held there by several dozen hands conjured into being by Robin, who had once more used her power to basically nail herself in place along with Nami, Makino and Sanji. Zoro had simply grimly hung on to the nearest railing, as head Hina.

It took a few moments for everyone to recover. Nami was one of the fastest, hopping to her feet and racing to the wheel, which had been left completely unattended during their fall. After all, there was nothing there they could do about at the time. Now Nami quickly took control, twisting the tiller this way and that as she stared avidly down and to be logged pose on her wrist, sensing the ship changing direction slightly as the tiller moved. As Luffy looked up at her, having closed the hatches over the Jet Dials, Nami began to dance a wild jig. "Yes! Yes! Woohoo!"

Luffy laughed, hopping up next to her. "So, what's our course, navigator?" Luffy questioned, hopping up onto the railing directly in front of the wheel, winking at her. "We don't have to find a way back up there, are we? I mean, the thing was pointing down, but there was, the White Sea to think about..."

"Don't even joke about that! It's pointing in a normal direction, not up any longer!" Nami groaned even as she tried to keep back her tears. The smirk on Luffy's face and the hair ruffling earlier was enough to tell her that Luffy really had forgiven her for her major cockup the night previously. That was astonishing, and frankly, made her appreciate her captain even more. Made her appreciate her **friend** even more.

Of course, it wasn't the first time that Luffy had ever just forgiven someone for a major transgression against him. In point of fact, a lot of the problems Ranma had in his previous life was because he simply wasn't the kind to hold a grudge, especially against a friend. And none of his friends in his past life were quite as close to him as his present crew was. For Luffy, it was really a no-brainer.

"I'll leave this to you," Luffy said, ruffling her hair before hopping off of the railing. "We need to make certain that that impact didn't damage the ship. Sanji, you're with me. Chopper, Zoro, check the rigging and the masts. Marines, the sides if you please."

Hina might've made a quick quip about whether or not that meant he wanted them over the side instead of checking them, but Luffy had already entered the ship. Seeing that, she sighed, clicking her fingers in annoyance at missing such an opportunity. She then turned to her men and shouted out, "You heard the man, let's earn our keep, marines. Up and at them."

Deep in the hold, Sanji and Luffy found a few leaks where a few of the outer board had been knocked slightly out of position. A tiny trickle of water had leaked through, but the two of them fixed it up quickly.

Luffy frowned as they stood back up from their work, staring at them thoughtfully while directing Sanji to fix them. Sanji looked over his shoulder at his captain, kind of confused at the look of concern on her face. "What's wrong, Captain-chan?"

Twitching at the nickname Sanji had just given her, Luffy scowled at the cook. "No, Sanji. Just no. As for what's wrong... something has been feeling off about the ship since we started to

descend,” Luffy said slowly, tugging at his pigtail. “I thought it might have been my danger sense instead of my Kenbunshoku, it’s kind of easy to mix those two up, and even repaired, the keel is a weakness until we can replace it.”

“But that kind of project would require a major dry dock and the ship being almost entirely taken apart to do it,” Sanji replied, breathing out a smoke ring. “And it doesn’t look like we need to worry about it right now.”

“Nope, it turns out that wasn’t what I was sensing. Meh, it’ll come to me, I guess,” Luffy shrugged then, patting the inside of the hull for a moment. “And you’re right, the ship is holding up well. The Resolve is one tough-ass ship!”

Sanji chuckled. “Well, it would have to be, to be the ship of the future Pirate King, right?”

“Yep, just like every other crewman,” Luffy chuckled, exchanging a fist bump with the blonde man before they headed back up to the main deck.

On the main deck Nami had indeed taken over, shouting orders to Marines and pirates alike to get the sails rigged and the breath dials battened down, because there was a breeze coming, followed by what she called “A quick squall! It shouldn’t last for more than twenty minutes but is going to be on us in five!”

“Hey, Weather Witch! What about our course?” Zoro bellowed back.

“If we catch it right, the wind from the squall is going to get us started heading directly towards where the Log Pose is pointing Zoro, don’t worry! It’s why I’ve got the crew down there waiting.”

Hearing this as he came out from the main hatch, Luffy nodded, moving to the aft deck to stare in the direction Nami had predicted the squall would come from, then down at the Log Pose and back again. “Five minutes?”

“Four minutes from now, five minutes from when I initially spoke,” Nami replied firmly. “I suppose it’s a good thing you’re already in your female body.”

Right on time, the squall with its accompanying rain hit the ship, and Nami skillfully had the ship riding with the wind, pushing them in the direction the Log Pose was currently pointing. Hina and two of the Marines who were experienced with the Grand Line gaped up at her at first, until Nami shouted orders at them to pitch in. All the while, Luffy was simply throwing her hands in the air, shouting, “That is the navigator of the future Pirate King people! Accept no substitute.”

Hina shook her head, astonished anew at the skills of this strange small crew of pirates. *A swordsman who can cut steel, a cook who can fight and make miracles happen in his kitchen, a doctor better than any naval surgeon I've met, Nico Robin the Demon Child, a sniper who can use Busoshoku, a captain who possesses the Haoshoku and a navigator who can predict the weather of the Grand Line! I've never heard of anything like that! And it isn't as if it's some kind of strange Devil Fruit either, I've seen her swimming!*

Later, after the squall had passed, the ship might well have ended up becalmed for their first night back on the Blue Sea. However, Laki was quick to turn on the breath dials, and with them blowing into the schooner's sails, the Resolve moved along at a brisk pace.

Indeed, as she stood by the wheel, Nami felt the ship was almost enjoying itself, racing across the ocean like a dolphin. For about fifteen minutes after the changeover to dial-power, Nami stood there. Then, certain the ship was handling it well, handed the wheel over to Sanji with a firm nod, getting a smile and nod in turn as he took both the wheel and the Log Pose from her.

The crew's spare Log Pose had been destroyed in Enel's assault on the Resolve, whereas Nami's Log Pose had been safe in her room below.

"So, what now?" Hina asked from below, leaning against the mainmast, staring at the breath dial as it was put to its intended use thoughtfully, before looking back to Luffy, who had been joined by Robin and Zoro. "Do you put us over the side at one of your small ships, or what?"

"We might've done that if there was an island in sight, and if we had any small ship beyond the Waver but doing so to you out here on the Grand Line would just be basically killing off most of your Marines. You and Fullbody might survive for a while unless you get dunked in the Grand Line. In which case, as a Devil Fruit user, you're sunk." Luffy shrugged his shoulders, eloquently saying what he thought of that. In point of fact, that was one of several points making Luffy hesitant about taking the lightning fruit for himself even after they dropped off the marines. After all, they were going to be traversing the Grand Line for a possibly the rest of their lives, and it just didn't seem to make much sense for Luffy, of all people, to tempt fate like that.

"So, you're going to be stuck with us for a while," Luffy smirked at Hina. "Unless that is, you can't stomach sailing under a Jolly Roger for any longer."

"It is not so much stomaching it, as it would be all too easy to get used to it," Hina muttered as she turned away.

That first night back on the Grand Line was remarkably calm for the most turbulent and wild of seas. The next day however, dawned extremely dreary, and continued in that frame of mind as the weather of the Grand Line came upon them with a vengeance. At first it was fog.

None of the crew, not even Luffy, could see more than 2 inches in front of their faces, which made doing anything extremely parlous. Then it was raining hailstones the size of two fists clenched together, which was actually quite good practice for everyone aboard...

Luffy stood in the center of the main deck, cracking his knuckles as he stared upwards. "Hail, right? Grand Line style, I'm presuming."

"That's what my weather sense is telling me," Nami answered, crouching by the wheel, where Chopper was taking a turn as helmsman in his human form. She would have been below, but Luffy had forbidden anyone but Makino, who was still recovering from the amount of electricity which had gone through her nerves, to be inside for this. "This is sooo going to suck."

Robin stood with Laki, who wore a somewhat bemused expression on her face as they both waited by the prow of the ship. "So, these things are basically ice balls? I know what ice is obviously, but I've never seen it in nature." Sky Island was a summer island, and she had never seen any other season, not really.

"Indeed. You do not want to be hit by hail or anything similar without going through our captain's toughness training first. Tekkai is extremely helpful in dealing with such things, to say nothing of Busoshoku," Robin agreed, closing her eyes.

Laki shivered, and not just because the weather had been steadily growing colder in the past few minutes, but also because dozens of eyes had appeared up the nearest mast and all around the two women, paired with hands. "Right. And we'll be doing what exactly?"

"Listen to Luffy," Robin instructed. "The young man has some truly insane ideas for training, but I cannot argue that they often work."

"Right! In the name of my 'everything can be training' motto, the training exercise today, boys is, to either catch, slice, break or otherwise redirect every hailstone you possibly can. We don't want the ship to take any damage if we can possibly help it!" Luffy shouted.

Just then, Zoro's hand flashed to the side, and there was a crack as he smashed a hailstone as big as his own head into pieces, sending most of the pieces over the side of the ship. Everyone's eyes turned upwards, and Luffy laughed wildly. "Grand Line-sized hailstones! Just bring it, you shitty sea!"

"You heard the man marines," Hina belted out from near the pirate captain where she stood in front of her marines, all of whom were armed with shovels. They had been given the shovels and responsibility for the third mast, the one between where Luffy was and the aft of the ship. "Swing those shovels! When the hail stops, I don't want to see a single dent in the woodwork on our section of the ship!"

“Yes, Commodore Hina!” shouted Fullbody and the other marines as they swung the shovels with a will at every hailstone that came near them. Several of the marines were hit in turn by the falling projectiles, but the group of marines still on their feet from Hina’s original crew had been through a lot since traveling on the Knock Up Stream. They persevered, and their shovels smashed more hailstones than hit them thanks to their ongoing training with her and the advice some of them had taken from the extremely odd pirate crew they found themselves sailing with.

Indeed, with Sanji and Zoro laughing, Hina chuckling, kicking out or punching as need be, everyone bar Makino got into the swing of things. And even Makino, from the safety of the entrance to the kitchen, shot more than a few of the hailstones out of the sky, helping the marines.

After that, it became snow. Large clump gobs of snow that stuck to everything, covering the ship. Laki became first enamored of the phenomenon, then annoyed by the weather, feeling freezing cold for the first time until she put on a large, heavy coat, another first.

The marines were kept busy shoveling the deck, while Luffy and the others kept the sails and aft deck clear. Robin once more proved her worth by aiding in this effort, hands and dozens of makeshift shovels being wielded all across the ship, while she sat in the kitchen enjoying cocoa with the other ladies as Sanji waited on them with his usual enthusiasm.

After two days of snow, hail and intense, near-hurricane winds, the ship was subject to warm rain, melting the snow. This was followed by scorching heat, so hot that no one wanted to be out in it, even in bikinis. Chopper was really suffering through this, and eventually, Luffy hit on the idea of putting him in the dial-freezer to keep him going.

“No,” the reindeer moaned, feebly moving his tiny hoofs. He was visibly suffering more than he had since they had left the Alabasta, more of a puddle of unresponsive fur than a person at the moment, sweat and saliva from his open mouth slowly making a lake around him in the center of the kitchen as Sanji opened the door to the freezer at Luffy’s suggestion. “Not going to be emergency rations.”

When that joke was explained to her, Hina’s laughter rang out loudly as Sanji hefted the cruise youngest member and slid him into the bottom of the dial freezer.

The day after that, everyone thought that this kind of weather was just going to continue, and Hina, two of her marines, Robin and Luffy were on duty in the morning. The day was clear, at least, but it was still quite hot. However, Nami joined them after breakfast and reported that the heat would die down to a more manageable level soon. Her prediction was proven accurate, and by midmorning, it was simply one heck of a nice day on the Grand Line, one which Nami reported would actually last.

“Well, ladies, I think it’s going to be a great day for some sunbathing! Who’s with me!” The answers she got were not all from the women, needless to say, and several brawls broke out between the Marines and Sanji throughout the rest the day, as Sanji attempted to protect the ladies’ modesty, while Luffy either joined the ladies for a time or transformed back into his male form and sparred with Zoro, the two of them working on speed techniques instead of full-on sparring that day.

Two days of merely hurricane-force winds and an attack of flying fish later, Nami smiled as she stared up at the sky, then over the aft of the ship, before moving forward to the prow staring down into the water for a moment then up again at the sky. What she was looking for no one else could quite tell, but Nami nodded firmly as if she had found whatever she had been looking for before turning to the others on the deck. “I think we’ve entered an island’s seasonal weather area, people! It’s a summer island.”

At around midday, this guess was proven accurate, as they began to see land ahead of them. It was extremely flat land, Luffy thought as he looked at it through the spyglass. Something like a plain almost, with no mountains or anything else of that nature. He could see trees and a bit of forest there, but they were too far out to make out any details.

“Orders?” Nami inquired. What she meant was, ‘do you see any threats,’ but she didn’t have to voice that.

Luffy frowned for a moment, then simply shrugged. “It doesn’t look like it’s inhabited, so I suppose we can just go straight in. Zoro, upfront with the sounding line. I do not want us to damage the Resolve by taking it too far in, understood? Laki in the crow’s nest, look out behind us just in case. Everyone else, standby.”

Zoro acknowledged his orders with a grunt, but the Resolve, with its schooner rig keel, was actually able to get within 50 feet of the edge of the island before he started to hit bottom. The edge of the island did not gradually lead up to a beach or even a massive cliff, as they had seen before on Alabasta and Drum Island. Instead, the ocean remained deep almost to the bottom of the edge of the area of the island that was visible above water. This area, in turn, was composed of a tiny cliff, barely four feet out of the water.

They were easily able to see what the island offered beyond that demarcation line. The island looked like it was dominated by rolling plains in every direction, with a single tree here and there bar a forest along the edge of the isle about two miles away from where the Resolve dropped anchor. Those were very odd tall trees though, extremely tall and extremely straight trees, their branches only beginning at something like eighty feet in the air.

As they watched, an animal came by, a massively long dachshund, its body almost equal to the length of the Resolve. Everything else however was the same as on a normal wiener dog. It didn’t even have more legs in order to support its weight like that, which Robin thought was kind of bizarre. *But again, this is the Grand Line. Bizarre is the norm here. Although that dog*

*does look rather friendly. I wonder if it can do tricks?* A tiny thought bubble appeared over her head at that point, showing the dog being put through its paces at a dog show before standing on its hind legs, a move that took its head up and into the clouds.

“... You see the weirdest things on the Grand Line,” Sanji noted, breathing out from a new cigarette provided to him by Laki.

“Look at it this way, Cookey,” Laki laughed as she watched the dog retreat into the distance. She had never seen an animal like that before, and she was excited to explore her first island away from Sky Island. “With animals like that and those weird trees, there are sure to be new fruits and stuff to try.”

“You certainly have a point, my lady,” Sanji answered, bowing grandly.

Luffy had also been watching the dog, too, grinning a little. With a dog like that, he doubted he’d run into any furry little horrors around here. He turned to Hina, looking at the marine commodore thoughtfully and taking in the rest of her crew. A crew that had been horribly mauled since their battle over the Knock Up Stream. There were only eight Marines in fighting shape, including Fullbody, with three more crippled, from the entire overstrength crew of the galleon Hina had taken from Alabasta in her quest to hunt down Luffy. “So, what you think? Do you all want to get off here, or chance coming with us to another island? Or do you want us to help you build a ship?”

Hina smirked at him, a mocking pout on her face. “Do you want to get rid of me so much then?” she teased, before the words her mind let loose could register in her mind. As they did, Hina scowled internally. *Shit! I really do have to get myself and my marines away from these pirates. They are just too damn nice!*

Just that morning, she and Nami had had an incredibly enlightening conversation about fashion of all things, as the orange-haired girl had been doing her nails! Nor was it only Hina who was being completely blindsided by this crew. Hina had seen her marines going along with some kind of training that Zoro and Luffy had been doing the day before, and the two assistant cooks that survived were practically worshipping the ground Sanji walked on. At the same time, Fullbody had been flirting with Makino, pushing her wheelchair around the deck until Sanji had spotted them and started another brawl.

“Erm, I mean, yes, I think we need to search the island,” she added hurriedly. “We need to separate ourselves from you quickly. Already, just because of the time we’ve spent in your company, all of us are going to be up on charges of collusion despite what we were able to accomplish up in Sky Island. Defeating a logia user, especially a lightning fruit user, is going to offset that a bit but seeing as he wasn’t a pirate, it won’t offset all of it.”



"Huh, could have fooled me! Wasn't he stealing from people, killing them if they got in his way? Hell, he even had a ship for his getaway, and I think he might have had a flag too. No Skull and crossbones, but hey, ya can't have everything," Luffy shot back.

"Indeed, in that way, you could say Enel was a better pirate than you. Certainly, a more normal sort of pirate anyway," Hina retorted.

This caused Luffy to roll his eyes. "Bah. If he had a dream, he wasn't willing to put his life on the line for it. Everyone else's lives, sure, but not his own. That means he fails as a pirate, or at least my kind of pirate. The kind that really changes the world."

"Heh, true enough." Shaking her head, as she thought about how Luffy would change the world, Hina gestured to the forest, which began about two miles away. "Perhaps if there are enough trees, you could give us enough supplies to build a boat?"

Luffy nodded agreement that and had the ship turned side-on to the tiny cliff face, after which they dropped the ship's second anchor, and Chopper tossed across several grapples, which dug into the side of the cliff, eventually creating a very rudimentary rope bridge. With Luffy bouncing along in the air beside them carrying Makino. Chopper, Nami and the marines used the makeshift group bridge to cross.

Setting Makino and her wheelchair down, Luffy closed his eyes, sending out a pulse of Kenbunshoku, which, as he had almost expected, caused his mind to throb instantly in pain. *Okay, now I know I'm not doing this right! Maybe I should've gone to little Aisa for some pointers? But then again, she was born with it. Would she have been able to even tell me what I was doing wrong? It could have been like someone trying to describe colors to a blind man.*

Nonetheless, Luffy was able to get an impression of the island. "Okay, so this island feels kind of like a giant rectangle, longer length-wise then it is deep from this point inland, with a slight curve to it. I can't get a feel for the animals, there's a lot of them, but I don't think there's anything dangerous. Beyond that, I was only able to sense one person living here."

He looked back at the ship, thinking deeply. Luffy didn't like leaving it unattended, especially not out in the open like this. Normally he would leave Zoro behind as ships guard, but he'd done that a few times now, and Luffy felt it was someone else's turn. *Of course, I also kind of want to punish Sanji for perving on me in my female form the other day. Two birds with one stone and all that.*

"Sanji, you and Laki stay on or near the ship. Is that okay with you, Laki?"

Laki shrugged. "I'd like a sample of the wood, and if you see any deposits of iron, I'd love to get my hands on more. Unless I can talk you into letting me melt down one of your cannons?" Laki asked jokingly. Laki had forgotten that Luffy hadn't wanted any talk about new weapons while the marines were around, but thankfully Hina was already getting her group

organized, marching off to the nearby forest with saws and hammers, so they didn't hear anything.

None of the surviving marines were carpenter's mates, so honestly, the idea of them being able to build a ship was somewhat laughable. On the other hand, Hina at least knew about wood and should be able to figure out if it was even possible in the first place.

Luffy laughed at that, saying, "We'll see. And Sanji, keep one of the Den Den Mushi on you. Makino, Robin and I have three of them."

"A snail for the cook with the snail's eyebrow. Good one, Luffy," Zoro chuckled.

"What was that, you national treasure?!" Sanji roared back. Their back and forth had restarted the day after they had hit the Blue Sea but Zoro didn't call Sanji the 'love-cook' any longer. The fact he'd proven up to that label took all the fun out of it.

But before this latest back and forth could erupt into fisticuffs, Laki pushed Sanji back toward the ship, causing him to swoon a little. "Enough of that. Let's get back to the ship. With any luck, I can finish the latest rebuild of my rifle before the marines get back. But after that, Luffy, I want to explore the island too."

"You got it," Luffy promised. We're just going to head inland a bit, then come back, and we can switch off. You, Chopper, Nami and Sanji can explore the island while the rest of us watch the ship."

At that, Sanji couldn't stop himself and moved around Laki's hands on his shoulders, his eyes having turned into hearts as he flashed a big thumb's up to his captain. "Nice pairing Luffy!"

"Moron," Zoro muttered, then raising his sheathed blade to block a kick from the cook.

This time it took Luffy to break the two of them apart, but eventually Sanji and Laki returned to the Resolve and with Luffy in the lead, the rest of the crew traveled inland, heading towards where Luffy had sensed the one person still living on the island. Traveling at the speed that Makino's wheelchair could manage, the group moved across the plains, then passed through what looked like an apple orchard of some considerable size, the apples oddly elongated, where they hung from the equally long trees.

Hopping up through the air via Geppo, Luffy picked one such fruit, biting into one of them as he dropped back to the others.

Robin shook her head at that, sighing theatrically. "If you were so hungry, we should've eaten before we left the ship," she admonished. "What if that was poisoned?"

“Cast-iron stomach,” Luffy announced almost proudly. “My brothers and I had to cook for ourselves for a while. And you haven’t lived until you have had to run away from my grandfather trying to chase you down with what he called skilly ‘n’ duff. Trust me, after being forced to eat that mess, no kind of poison holds any kind of fear for me.”

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Deep in the bowels of the world’s most terrifying and inescapable dungeon, someone sneezed. “ACHOO!”

A strange devil-looking man turned to a far larger, even more demonic man, a wide, eager smile on his face. “Chief Warden Magellan, are you ill?! Perhaps then you should step down! Yes, then I can take your place, I mean, I would be willing to take over for you.”

The larger man turned and, without any change of expression, began to breathe out a green miasma toward the other man. “What was that, Hannibal?”

“AH, I’m sorry, don’t poison me!”

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Hearing Luffy’s declaration, Robin laughed at that before looking up at the odd-looking trees all around them. It wasn’t archaeology by means, or ancient ruins, but the island was interesting enough. “I wonder what kind of evolutionary necessity causes the odd local adaptations we’ve seen in both the animals and the trees.”

Luffy chuckled at Robin’s look of knowledge-lust, mild version. He elbowed her lightly in the side, before remembering that there were no Marines around at the moment, and no Sanji either. He looked at her and moved slightly to the side, his hand touching hers. Robin looked at him, then around at the rest of the crew, and seeing Robin not objecting, Luffy smiled, taking her hand in his.

Seeing this out of the corner of her eye, Nami bit back a scowl, shaking her head as she knew that her initial rush of possessive anger was the lingering remnants of her crush on Luffy. *And Robin was right; I’m not attracted to Luffy’s female body.* During the day that they’d been able to take it easy and get some sunning in, Nami had seen Luffy in his female garb most of the

day and hadn't felt any rush of desire or even interest beyond a vague annoyance that Luffy had such muscle tone even as a woman.

That and the rest of her conversation with the older woman made Nami realize that her feelings for Luffy weren't real. Or at least weren't love as she had thought. After all, how could you love someone only half the time? *Hopefully now that I know that, I can start to ignore flashes of jealousy like this one.*

With that in mind, Nami threw off her initial anger, and decided to see if she could have a bit of fun with this. *Pity Sanji's not here, but I can wait for that explosion, I think.* With that Nami turned to wink at the couple, then shouted, "Oh that's how it is! And how long has this been going on?" Acting as if she hadn't in point of fact known the two of them were a couple, or that the entire thing hadn't happened between her and Luffy.

*That girl's acting skills are quite formidable,* Robin thought, while Luffy rolled his eyes and Chopper and Zoro turned to them. Makino simply smiled serenely up at them both from her wheelchair, which Chopper had been pushing along. The fact the green-haired woman had discerned what was happening between Luffy and Robin wasn't a surprise, really. Makino was almost scarily good at reading people.

It was Zoro's response, which truly surprised her, though. He was simply smirking, shaking his head. "I figured something was up ever since we found the two of you sunbathing together back on Jaya. Were you hiding because of the Marines, or..."

"We were worried about the crew's dynamics," Luffy replied, although it hadn't been a 'we' decision at the time. Robin had been the one worried about the reaction of the crew, whereas Luffy had not cared whether or not they shared their relationship with anyone else, though he had conceded the point about not being open about it in public. "We'll come clean with Sanji once the marines are gone for sure, but since he's not here..."

Robin chuckled, as the arm around her waist tightening little, enjoying the touch. The two of them hadn't had much time to be alone ever since Luffy had recovered from his fight with Enel, a problem that had gotten worse since they had landed back on the Grand Line.

Still, in a way, while her hormones disagreed with her, Robin couldn't begrudge that time since her and Nami's friendship had deepened considerably since their talk. Nami had shared quite a lot more about her life than she had before, and Robin had found herself becoming something of a sisterly figure, more experienced in terms of her life and in terms of the books she had read, which gave her a lot of insight into the human condition. They weren't yet as close as Nami had been to Vivi, but they were much closer than they had been before Nami's fuckup, a name Nami cheerfully gave her moment of teenage ego.

She leaned her head against Luffy's as Makino added her own congratulations to the others.

Behind her, Chopper just looked a little bemused. "So, this is an example of the human mating ritual? Weird. I know everything about the biological side of things, of course. Doctorine even had me read stuff about the birthing process enough to see a human female through the process. But I never studied anything about the actual mating ritual itself."

"Don't worry about it, Chopper. If a female reindeer comes along, you'll know what to do, I'm sure."

"You mean run for the hills because they don't like me?" Chopper grumbled, looking like he wanted to hit his captain for a moment there, before shaking his head. "Besides, I'm way too young to think about that kind of thing."

Makino looked up at Chopper in his monster form as he resumed pushing her wheelchair over the grassy terrain underneath the apple trees. "Exactly how old are you for your people anyway?"

"I don't honestly have people. Since I ate that Devil Fruit, I've been stuck between humans and reindeer, so I'm not really one or the other. I'm around fifteen in human terms, and two or three in terms of a reindeer. Not fully grown in other words." Chopper shrugged. "I tend to think of myself more as a human in terms of my age."

"And you're not attracted to human women?" Zoro questioned, reflecting that this topic was sort of like watching a ship wreck on the shoreline: you just couldn't turn away.

"Nope. You're all hairless monkeys to me. Believe me, you would not believe how much you guys are related to monkeys!" Chopper laughed. "If you all preferred to live in trees and toss feces at one another you'd nail it, hairy or not!"

Luffy laughed and congratulated Chopper on that zing, while the others all looked insulted. The walk continued for a bit until they came out of the apple orchard and found themselves standing in front of what Robin called a "Yurt. It's a kind of sturdy tent that nomads put up when they're moving around. This one doesn't seem to be inhabited at present."

There was a whinny a second later, and a white long-bodied horse came around the corner of the house, looking at them curiously. "Oh, wow, she's gorgeous!" Nami murmured, moving forward with a hand outstretched. Robin and Makino both agreed as the horse just stood there, looking at them with watery eyes.

Chopper walked up to it, waving his hand and gesturing to the house as he questioned the horse before relaying the horse's answers to the rest of the crew. "The horse says her name is Shelly. She was part of a clan of people who live here on what she calls 'Long Ring Long Land.' Shelly's human tribe apparently travels around it, keeping ahead of the ocean swell. But Shelly decided to stay behind to look for her owner, who disappeared one day. The rest of the tribe had already looked for them, and she hasn't found him since, nor has the rest of the tribe

returned. I tried to ask her how long that had been, but animals aren't so good about noticing time."

Luffy frowned, staring at the horse and all around. "Well, from what Kenbunshoku was telling me, there **is** someone here." The horse perked up noticeably at that, looking around, as everyone else did the same.

Robin, however, was already staring at something. After a few moments, she called out, "Have we seen any bamboo anywhere else on the island as yet?"

"No, we haven't. And if there was any bamboo, we'd see it. Bamboo spreads like crazy, and it pushes out other trees too. I think it's called a parasitic plant or something like that?" Luffy shrugged. "Why?"

The rest of the crew turned to look at him, and Nami asked, "How the heck do you know that? I never took you for the kind to like gardening."

"I have hidden depths," Luffy retorted loftily, moving over to his girlfriend, repeating his earlier question. "Why, Robin?"

She wordlessly pointed to two bamboo poles standing extremely close together. Extremely tall bamboo poles. Which, as everyone else, was looking at them began to move. One of them arced forward, almost hitting Nami, but she dodged in time, followed by the other foot, which nearly clipped Luffy and Robin as they ducked underneath it. The movement reminded Luffy of something, and he frowned. "Why am I trying to remember one of the weirder versions martial arts I've ever seen? Martial arts stilt fighting?"

"And what exactly would that be?" Robin asked, crouching on the ground beside him.

Luffy shrugged. "Weird martial arts style based around fighting in an area dominated by quicksand, forcing people to fight one another while standing on stilts. I think those are stilts. Someone made stilts out of living bamboo." He shook his head. "That someone is a moron."

"Is that even possible?" Zoro was noticeably skeptical.

Luffy shrugged. "Only one way to find out."

With that, he hopped up into the air, ascending about seven stories into the air before he found the individual on the top of the stilts, proving his earlier guess had been right. The man was old, extremely elderly in point of fact, with a white beard that looked about as thick as a sponge on his face, matching the white hair on his head noticeably.

"Hey, Old Man!" Luffy announced his presence tapping the elderly man on the shoulder.

This might have not have been the best idea, as it turned out. The old man turned, his eyes flying wide open, staring in shock as he stumbled sideways, the stilts losing balance as the man grabbed at his chest. "GAH, my heart!"

"Oh, crap!" Luffy muttered as the man fell away from him. He bounced down quickly, grabbing, before slowly going to the ground. "Chopper! I think I just gave him a heart attack."

"You did what?!" Chopper growled, pushing Luffy away from the old man, and quickly going to his knees beside him before pulling out a stethoscope, then rapidly going through the motions of helping someone survive from a heart attack while Shelly turned around and began to mule kick Luffy in the side of the body. Luffy grunted but remained where he was, figuring he deserved this.

OOOOOOO

Out at sea, a large ship came over the horizon, heading to the Long Ring Long Land. Bigger than a marine galleon, especially in terms of height and beam, the vessel was a pirate ship, it's foremasts black and painted with skull and crossbones that had narrowed eyes, ears, and a large, birdlike nose with the words Foxy, the word split by the skull. At the front of the ship was a giant fox head, along with two large, comical paws sticking out just above the waterline. At the back was a foxlike tail, which possibly acted as a rudder.

Circling the island for some time, the captain of the ship had discovered that this place was one of the main crossover points of two ways through Grand Line, and pirates and other ships were easy pickings occasionally. Although they were this group's prey, if in a very unusual manner.

"Captain! There's a new ship on around the island, and it's flying a Jolly Roger! The Jolly Roger looks like a... It's wearing a Straw Hat captain!"

From an individual at the prow of the ship came a very unusual laugh. "Fehfehfehfeh! Excellent." He stared down at a group of wanted posters that another man had quickly handed him, laughing evilly. "When we add their powers to our own, we really will be ready for the second half of the Grand Line, ready a shore boat and then move the ship into position to capture their own."

OOOOOOO

Chopper had been able to help the elderly man recover relatively quickly. Despite the heart attack, the man, whose name was Tonjit, was in quite good health and answered many of their questions about the island. Long Ring Long land was a kind of archipelago to the locals, though Nami suspected it was actually a caldera of some kind, the majority of which had flooded. The ring in question was a series of large bluffs connected by lower paths, each of them small but seemingly complete islands of their own.

The paths were long enough that unless you were insanely lucky, the Grand Line's normal currents and weather would make it impossible to sail from one to another island. The paths connecting each piece of the island to the other appeared once a year, allowing the tribe of nomads to travel along them to the next island, always moving.

Tonjit's personal story, on the other hand, wasn't nearly as interesting. Luffy wasn't certain as he had started to tune him out after he tried to eat some rancid cheese, but apparently, the old man had been part of some kind of stilt competition or something? Anyway, he had made his stilts, but these stilts, being Long Ring Long Land bamboo, grew even after being cut, and he soared far too high into the sky, so high he could barely see the ground underneath him. His family had thought he had gone missing for some reason and left him behind, but Sherry, his personal horse, refused to leave.

Again, Luffy wasn't certain about many of the details there. The idiocy was too annoying to plow through. But Chopper at least was happy to reunite the old man and his horse. Now he, Nami and Makino were watching Tonjit racing around on Sherry's back, with Nami and Makino satisfied by the answers to their questions. Nami was happy to know that the Log Pose would need seven hours to settle onto the next portion of its course, and there weren't any animals on the island who would attack humans.

What she wasn't particularly pleased by was, after the conversation had turned to why Tonjit was alone, Robin and Luffy snuck off. Zoro taking the opportunity to nap in among the apple trees didn't even register to her. No, the couple being off on their own bothered her.

Nami knew intellectually it shouldn't. Indeed, a part of her was grateful for the fact that they had left instead of done something lovey-dovey right there where she could have seen it. But Nami was still dealing with a bit of jealousy in terms of seeing Robin with Luffy, a part of Nami was still trying to convince the rest of her to act on her crush, to fight for Luffy's affections. Nami got over this by concentrating on shouting questions at Tonjit about the island and its geography.

Elsewhere, the couple in question were leaning against the side of the yurt, with Robin trying to talk Luffy out of simply outing the relationship the instant they got back to the Resolve. Sanji had mentioned some new kind of coffee, and she wanted to try it before breaking the



news to him. "After all, he might not give me the same treatment that he gives every other girl on board after he knows I am taken."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. If Sanji is willing to flirt with my female form some of the time before his brain comes back online, he's certainly going to keep flirting with you even after we tell him you're taken. No matter how much I don't want him to," he grumbled.

"So long as Sanji looks but doesn't try to touch, his flirting is completely harmless," Robin laughed. "At least when it comes to me. I rather think Sanji is far too over the top with his flirting and his grandiose displays of so-called chivalry. Besides, we have already determined that it is an almost automatic reaction for Sanji. He really can't help it."

"Feh doesn't mean I have to like it," Luffy grumbled. Then he looked at Robin, cocking his head to one side as he turned around to look her in the face. "You're not worried about the crew's reactions, definitely not after how they reacted earlier. You're worried about something else. What is it?"

The words and tone were tender, but the question still caused Robin to flinch. She tried to look away but found her eyes captured by Luffy's compassionate blue gaze. She bit her lip and found herself speaking before she could stop the words coming out in a jumble, entirely unlike her normal way of speaking.

"I, I am afraid. Afraid of what is happening between us, afraid of, of admitting to everyone that we are a couple. I, I have been alone for so long, and these feelings, this connection that is growing between us. I... you have mentioned before that you haven't wanted to paint too large a target on the back of the crew, but if... every time I have thought I found a home, found someplace to be safe, it was taken from me. Either I would be betrayed, forced to betray in turn or forced to move on by the marines, or, or World Government operatives. You know the type, you use the Rokushiki."

She paused, breathing in deeply, but Luffy didn't say anything, waiting for Robin to continue. "I have never, not since leaving... not since leaving home all those years ago, have I ever allowed myself to open up to someone as I have you. That is, when I think about it, it is beyond terrifying, it is... I could never allow myself that kind of weakness before. Now that I have, if it becomes known that I have done so... I fear, I fear as if something will appear to snatch this feeling away."

*To snatch **you** away*, Robin thought but did not say aloud. Robin knew intellectually that she had rarely met someone stronger than Luffy. That was why she had backed him against Crocodile. But what was the strength of one man compared to the strength of a Buster Call?

Robin had witnessed the end of an island. She had witnessed the power of the Buster Call, when an admiral, several vice admirals, and a fleet of galleons had been called in to eradicate all life from Ohara, where historians had been looking into the Void Century.

And ever since, the marines had made a point of targeting any group Robin seemed to get close to. This forced Robin to keep people at arm's length, which in turn made her a target for suspicion and betrayal, creating a deadly loop.

The strength Luffy had shown in beating Crocodile, Doberman and then Enel had begun to crack the hold this great fear. But it was still there. Indeed, if she had time to think about before Nami's shout earlier, Robin might have broken away from Luffy's hand then, fearing news of their relationship getting out.

Luffy sighed, leaning away from Robin to sit on his haunches as he studied her for a moment. "We can't keep our relationship quiet at this point, not from the rest of the crew. That wouldn't be fair to Laki or Sanji. But if you are still so afraid, we just won't show our relationship while we're off the ship." He reached forward, gently holding Robin's chin and making her look up from where she had been staring down at her long, nimble fingers as she finished speaking. "It means a lot to me that you are slowly opening up to me, Robin and I know you can tell I've got my own secrets. I'm honestly looking forward to sharing them with you when we both make that last step." He grinned at that, winking at her, causing Robin to giggle, before Luffy became serious once again. "But realize this. I plan to be the Pirate King. I know what that means, the enemies that will bring me. And I am fine with that. Your burden, your fear, I can handle that too."

"You wish to be the Pirate King, but are you strong enough to claim that crown now?" Robin whispered though she did not pull away. "Can you face the might of the World Government as you are now?"

"No. But I am willing to get stronger every day, and someday, I will be. And the WG can't bring all its strength to bear on me either. They've got a lot more enemies than just me to think about." Looking into Robin's face and realizing he wasn't getting anywhere, Luffy decided to drop it for right now. "Just think about it, Robin. That's all I ask. Don't let past fears control your actions now."

Robin nodded. Then, feeling unwilling to continue the deep, emotional discussion – while she wasn't as bad as Nami at acknowledging them, Robin certainly wasn't used to being this open with someone else – she allowed a small smirk to cross her face. "I will think about it. But right now, there is a certain action I wish to take. After all, I doubt that even once our relationship is outed that we will have much time to ourselves onboard the ship..."

While he knew that Robin was using this to escape further discussions about her fears, Luffy smiled in turn. *I did say I wouldn't push, didn't I?* With that, Luffy leaned towards Robin, moving so that he was almost on top of her.

The kiss started lightly, almost tentatively despite the number of times they had kissed before this, colored by the emotional conversation they had been having. But then, Robin's arms went around him, pulling him in as she opened her mouth, her tongue flicking against Luffy's as it invaded her mouth. Her chest heaved as a bolt of desire went down her spine, and the kiss deepened as Luffy felt it too.

Alas, the two of them kissed for less than a minute before there was a loud bang, followed by an even louder 'fwip' sort of sound, interrupting their time together and waking up the sleeping Zoro, laid out against one of the apple trees. Hearing that noise, Luffy growled a little but pushed away from Robin, and the two of them hurried around the yurt.

On the other side, they found Nami and Chopper standing off against three new individuals. At the new individuals' feet, Tonjit groaned as blood began to pump down his arm from a wound to his shoulder. Sherry was on her side in a net nearby, obviously shot from a large bazooka like gun held by the largest of the three figures.

Those figures were a very odd bunch. One of them was taller than any of the Straw Hats by at least a few feet. He wore a leopard patterned scarf, had a wide, thick-lipped mouth, and long gloves up to its elbow. He stood hunchbacked, his long, wide arms on the ground like a gorilla's. Indeed, the man looked almost as much gorilla as a man, making Ranma remember Chopper's earlier comment on how close human and gorilla were.

Next was a woman with dark blue eyes, light blue hair, a pointed nose, even more pointed than Robin's, and a decent figure, shown off by the unzipped opening of what looked like a repurposed painter's full-body suit. It was colored pink, matched with gold epaulets, furry white elbow puffs, and a hat with another similar larger puff on it. Underneath, visible through the unzipped front that traveled down from her neck to below her navel, was a red bikini. She, like the gorilla man, also wore a mask, red in her case, black in his. The masks looked to be like that of a raccoon or something similar. At her side, she had a small baton.

In the center was a shorter man with foxlike features, a large, square chin and a bright red nose dominating what looked like a middle-aged face. His hair was up in a vi-shape from the top of his head. He wore a long purple fur-lined cloak, with large golden buttons. Underneath that, he didn't wear a shirt, showing off a somewhat toned chest paired with a wide, fat-seeming underbelly and a waist that looked like Humpty Dumpty to Ranma's eyes. His orange pants were held up orange suspenders. From his neck hung a silver amulet shaped like a fox.

Cocking his head Luffy looked at the one in the middle, who held a pistol in one hand. "Who are you supposed to be shitty hair, and what the fuck you doin' with the horse?"

That comment seemed to wound the man deeply as he went to all fours, his entire body turning white almost as he groaned, "Shitty hair?! Really, do I really have shitty hair!?"

While the big man began to laugh behind his hands at that, the girl knelt down next to him, "Don't worry about that, Captain Foxy, you have great hair! He's just jealous, that's all! And Hamburg, you stop laughing at the captain, you know he's sensitive!"

"Really? You dress in that hideous outfit, and now you're sucking up to your middle-aged captain like he's your sugar daddy? I'm actually feeling ashamed of my gender right now," Nami muttered, shuddering a little.

"Now, now," Makino interjected, as she moved to stand beside the other girl. "The poor, confused girl is simply showing solidarity with her captain, you can't hold that against her." She waited a breath then went on. "Her fashion sense, on the other hand, that you certainly can. Honestly, So much pink? And to pair it with a lighter pink and red, with that hair and that complexion? Are you an eleven-year-old perhaps that never grew out of the 'everything must be pink' stage?"

Robin merely shook her head sadly, as if the other woman wasn't worth trying to form words for.

"Why you!" the other girl shouted back as her captain recovered, laughing maniacally.

"Fehfehfehfeh! You're right, Porche-chan! They just don't know magnificence when they see it. As for who I am, Monkey D. Luffy, I am Foxy the Silver Fox! Captain of the Foxy pirates," the man exclaimed.

"You didn't answer my second question," Luffy growled, cracking his knuckles as Zoro restrained Chopper from charging forward with a hand on his head, the doctor unable to break his grip despite his anger at the injury to his former patient. "What're you doing with the horse and shooting the old man?"

"Fehfehfehfeh! Well, we are pirates, and I want the horse! I've never seen one like that before. The old man was just in the way. You can help him if you want after we leave. I just want the horse. Unless you want to fight me for it." Foxy replied in an offhand tone.

"Are you really challenging me to a fight?" Luffy laughed sinisterly, cracking his knuckles. He could tell the guy was a brawler, no style to speak of, and he didn't just mean in terms of clothing. Moreover, he wasn't setting off Luffy's danger sense.

"No, no, nothing like that! If you want to save the horse for the old man, then let's make a friendly little wager!" The man held up three gold coins in his hand. "Davy Back Fight."

"Davy Back Fight? What's that?" Luffy asked quizzically.

The larger man behind the captain and the girl laughed into his hands, and Luffy decided that there were at least two people on this crew who needed to die just because their laughs

were that annoying. "A pirate who doesn't know about the Davy Back Fight! Must be a poor pirate then!"

Luffy growled, curling his fingers into talons for a moment. "You're getting on my nerves. Explain quickly, while you still have the trachea to expel air to speak with."

Everyone else on the crew turned to Luffy, with Zoro and Nami actually clapping. "Damn! That was a great insult. First, you not only threatened, but you used a doctor-type word while doing it! Solid stuff," Zoro enthused.

Robin, on the other hand, shook her head. "I feel the sentence was somewhat clumsy, it worked, but it was evident you really had to try to make that word make sense there."

It was evident to the other three pirates they were not being taken very seriously. The captain was about to fall into a funk again, but Porche stepped forward, glaring at the other two women for their earlier comments while the one called Hamburg continued to chuckle in the background. "Davy Back Fight! It's a battle between pirate crews, designed so that we don't all come to blows and just kill one another off. It's a sacred bond to Davy Jones below. You toss a coin into the ocean while vowing to follow the rules of the game and wager your crews against one another."

Luffy's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Wager your crew?"

"She means that if you say, bet three coins, there are three rounds. After each round, the winner of that round is allowed to take a crewmember from the other side. That pirate is obligated by the pirate code to join his new crew and serve his new captain as well as he had his old one," Robin explained.

For a moment, what Robin was saying didn't register to Luffy, but when he got it, everyone there saw Luffy sort of snap inside. "What kind of fucking pirate would wager his crew like they were property!"

Nami winced, remembering that had been pretty damn close to what she had tried with Luffy during their last night in Skypiea, and indeed, in general with her crush. Not the wager, obviously, but she had treated him like property that could be stolen.

Yet even as she thought again about that, Luffy looked her way, having caught her wince. When she looked at him, Luffy shook his head, indicating that Nami was still forgiven for what she had done. That made Nami smile a bit, but renew her vow to not let her actions of that night continue to screw up everything.

When he turned back, Luffy's eyes hardening noticeably as he stared at the older pirate captain. The idea of a pirate captain putting his crew on the line for some stupid game was utterly infuriating to him.

“Are you so cowardly that you don’t think you’d win?” Foxy let loose another laugh, not having noticed any of this byplay. “Fehfehfehfeh! Well, I can’t blame you! Still, cowards won’t ever be able to get very far on this ocean unless they are preparing to wager more than just their own live but the lives and futures of the crew’s.”

“That was a great bit of justification for something that makes absolutely no sense. And I think I’m done talking to you.” Even though his voice was mild, Robin, Nami and the rest of his crew knew that Luffy was quite frankly furious at the very idea that he would wager any of them like that.

“In that case, I’ll take the horse,” Foxy grumbled in annoyance. He had hoped to goad the youngsters into a Davy Back Fight, but it seemed as if Monkey D. Luffy didn’t care enough about the locals to fall for his games once he learned of the stakes.

“Yeah, no.” Luffy shook his head.

“So, you will play the Davy Back Fight with us?” Foxy questioned, mildly confused by Luffy’s prevarication.

“No, we’re just going to eradicate you. But you’re not worth my time, personally.” Luffy smirked, one hand falling to the small Den Den Mushi hung on his waist. “Zoro, he’s yours.”

The instant the order left Luffy’s mouth, Zoro went from standing beside his captain to flashing forward, using Soru to cross the intervening distance like lightning. Two of his swords were in his hands as the third waited at his waist, the two swords cutting forward like the pincers of a crab.

But to everyone’s surprise, the Fox faced Captain was fast enough to raise his hands, creating a strange kind of sign with them, two fingers upraised the other two pressing into his thumb as he shouted out, “Noro-Noro Beam!”

Zoro twisted, bringing Sandai Kitetsu sword around, cutting through the beam, only to find the beam of energy seemingly ignoring his sword’s edge, hitting him full on. Instantly Zoro’s forward momentum halted as he slowed down so much it looked like he had been simply paused in place, one foot raised, his second sword paused as it began to swing down towards the shorter Foxy.

“Fehfehfehfeh! That’ll teach you to look before you leap!” as the captain guffawed, he grabbed at a series of pistols hidden from under his coat, unloading each in turn toward Zoro dropping them each to the ground as he did so.

The bullets flashed towards Zoro, but Makino reacted before they struck. Her hands were suddenly full of pistols as she fired, smashing two bullets with every one of her own. This left only two to hit Zoro, who grunted as they struck.

Not noticing the seemingly crippled woman's interference, Foxy turned away from the swordsman, certain two bullets would be enough to see to him. Instead he looked over at Luffy, shaking his head mockingly. "You don't know the first thing about being a pirate! When you challenge another crew, you're supposed to fight Captain to Captain. Setting your first mate on me is both cowardly and a blow to my pride!"

"Say that after you've actually beaten my first mate and proven yourself worth the time it'd take to introduce my fist to your skull," Luffy retorted, crossing his arms insolently. "If you think two bullets is enough to down a man who wants to be the world best swordsman, you really gotta have your eyes examined."

To his side, Makino settled her pistols back down onto her lap, smiling slightly. *Well, while my legs might not have any feeling in them just yet, there's nothing wrong with my reflexes! First hailstones, then bullets. Good progress, I think.*

"What!?" With comically wide eyes, Foxy turned back, only now realizing that something had happened to most of his bullets. As he did, he saw Zoro moving again. The swordsman instantly changed his trajectory, closing once more almost faster than Foxy could see.

Thinking quickly, Foxy threw out more Noro Noro Beams towards Luffy and the others who were simply standing there, then ducked under a blow from Zoro, flinging his hands upwards as he shot out the beams once more at him. The rest of the Straw Hat crew managed to dodge them pretty well at medium range, the beams not as fast as musket balls.

In response, Zoro twisted his body around, at the last second, bouncing away using Geppo. "You're going to have to try harder than that!" Zoro scoffed, closing once more with a combo of Geppo and Soru.

"H, Hamburg, help!" Foxy squeaked in fright as he dodged by a bare inch a blow that would have opened his throat up a slice appearing along his shoulder in his coat.

At his captain's cry, the large gorilla man somehow pulled out a massive mace from the back of his shorts, causing Luffy to blink in shock while the rest bar Makino got up from where they had flung themselves flat to avoid the Noro Noro Beams. "What the, I thought only women could automatically use the weapons space technique."

Zoro twisted around, blocking the larger man's mace with one sword, glaring at him like a wild animal for a moment before thrusting out his other sword, forcing the other man to defend against the stabbing attack with his mace. The mace cracked as the tip of the cursed blade struck it, piercing well into the iron of the mace, causing Hamburg's eyes to widen in shock before Zoro was caught by another Noro Noro Beam.

“Fehfehfehfeh! Porche-chan, keep the rest under wraps while I finish with this one!” Foxy ordered.

“Right, Captain, I’ll get the two whores first!” Porche turned, twirling her baton as she glared at Nami and Makino. As her baton twirled, flowers appeared all around it, which she sent forward with a wave of her baton somehow. Only Luffy noticed the tiny wires connected them all to the baton, pulling them out of a pouch at the small of her back. As they flew, each flower disconnected from those tiny wires, flashing forwards as points became visible under their petals. “Flower Shuriken!”

Luffy stepped in front of Makino as Chopper charged forward on his little legs, ignoring Porche to charge towards Hamburg and Zoro. He knew Makino could handle herself easily enough, but he didn’t want her to strain her body any more than she needed to. His hands flashed out, grabbing all of the shuriken aimed towards Makino, while Nami used Kami-e to good effect, easily dodging around the ones tossed at her.

Robin meanwhile smacked aside the one shuriken that came towards her, too busy analyzing the Devil Fruit the enemy captain was using. The beam was circular in nature, pink-hued in the main, and seemed to be able to pass through both bodies and other types of solids easily. So it was some kind of energy attack. It seemed to slow down anything it struck, but whether or not the effect was interchangeable or if it could be reversed by another beam was a question.

*Beyond that, I don’t think this Foxy person has much stopping power,* Robin mused, as she watched Zoro freezing again, and Foxy racing forward, his hands now covered with spiked boxing gloves he had pulled out from behind himself. She was about to raise her hands once more to help him, but Luffy held up a hand. “Don’t. Zoro wouldn’t want us interfering. Defending ourselves and taking out the other two is a different story.”

“Fox Rush!” Foxy roared, slamming blow after blow into Zoro’s face. Then he twisted around towards the rest of the Straw Hats, firing off more beams at them, which they dodged once more. “Damn it, stay still you, gahhhh! How are you all so quick, anyway!?”

Luffy shrugged, using Kami-e to dodge around a series of short-lived Noro-Noro Beams, a smirk on his features. “Clean living?”

“Damn it!” Foxy repeated himself, keeping his attention on the crew, using his hands to shoot out his beam attacks rapid-fire as he ordered, “Hamburg, finish the swordsman off. I’ve got this!”

“Right, captain!” Hamburg shouted, moving over to do just that.

But Foxy hadn’t targeted Chopper, apparently not seeing him as a threat. As Hamburg moved to attack the still slowed Zoro, Chopper closed with him, transforming at the last instant



into his Heavy Point before launching a massively powerful blow. "Heavy Shot!" the reindeer youth shouted, his large fist crashing into Hamburg's face, breaking his jaw and hurling him backward in a welter of blood and teeth.

Despite that punch, Hamburg was still conscious, but Chopper would've finished him off quickly if Foxy hadn't twisted around and slowed him down in turn. "Tactical retreat!" he shouted, racing after the girl, who had already begun to hightail it after seeing her shuriken dealt with so easily.

Seeing this, Luffy shook his head. "Now you can interfere."

Chortling, Robin crossed her arms. "A tactical retreat should be made the moment you know you are overmatched. That should have occurred to you before you even fired your pistol, Foxy-san. Sorry."

Having just pushed himself to all fours, Hamburg crumpled to the ground as hands appeared all over his body, twisting and snapping his back and other bones. The other two simply stumbled, their legs grabbed by hands that had appeared on the grassland beneath them.

"Good going woman," Zoro snarled as he came out of his own stasis, grunting only once as the continual impacts of the other man's punches landed all at once. But even all combined, the punches of the Fox faced pirate just didn't matter much to Zoro. Zoro was used to throwing down with Luffy every day, training as religiously as their captain did. Every day he dealt with punches or kicks that made even the assorted number of punches from the Foxy seem feeble.

He lifted a thumb to his nose and wiped away a bit of blood before hefting his swords, placing the one in his mouth but at an odd angle to Robin's mind. She blinked as the blade of the sword reflected the light above, then her eyes widened. "Good grief, Zoro is quite a bit more intelligent than one would think," she murmured.

Luffy laughed caustically, setting down Makino's wheelchair now that it seemed the fight was ending without more Noro Noro Beams coming towards them. "Yeah, when it comes to tactics, he's pretty darn quick. Now, if I could only get him to admit he's got a direction issue."

Zoro crouched low, shouting out his attack, "Oni Giri!"

Having gotten to his feet, Foxy laughed as he thrust forth his hands, shooting out another beam of Noro-Noro power. "Fehfehfehfeh, moron! When will you learn you can't..."

The instant before the beam would have impacted him, Zoro stopped his attack, flashing the sword in his mouth forward in a twirl along its gleaming edge, intersecting the beam before

it could hit his body. The sword, moving in a circular pattern paralleling the Noro Noro Beam, rebounded the beam away or downward away from Zoro.

Then Zoro disappeared to the enemy pirate's senses, reappearing on his other side. "Oni Giri attack revised, Light Speed Oni Giri!"

"He combined his normal attack with Soru," Luffy nodded in approval. "Not bad."

A second later, Foxy gasped as cuts appeared all over his front, slicing his clothing and body in not just two or three places but several, all of them spurting blood. Gasping, he fell back on the grass, the pain of the wounds causing him to slip into unconsciousness almost immediately.

"I didn't kill you," Zoro intoned as he pulled Wado Ichimonji out of his mouth, sheathing it at his side before doing the same to his other two blades. "Be thankful."

"Now, as for you..." Nami cracked her knuckles as she loomed over Porche, who had not been able to get to her feet quickly enough to run away. "What did you just call me a moment ago? You're about to learn that words can really hurt you more than they can hurt me."

With that, Nami started to wail on the other girl, while Makino shook her head with a chuckle, leaning back in her wheelchair before turning to look over at Chopper. "And how is Tonjit doing?"

"He'll be fine," Chopper announced, having rushed towards the action not to take part in it, although he would be the first to admit that the punch he had landed on the big guy had been very satisfying but rather to be closer to his patients. The instant his slowed-time had ended, he had gone to his knee next to Tonjit, his hands already busy. Already he had removed the bullet from older man's shoulder and was binding it with a poultice now. "He's old, but he should recover quickly enough. So long as he doesn't use this shoulder for a while."

"Good," Luffy grunted, nodding firmly in appreciation to Zoro, before looking over at Foxy. "Patch his wounds too, but don't do anything else for them. But first..." Luffy moved over, taking the hands of the other man, and pressing them palm to palm. "Remind me to start training you to not need to cross your arms to use your powers, Robin. I hadn't realized that kind of thing is a major weakness of any emitter type Devil Fruit user."

"True, I hadn't realized it before, but yes, it can be a distinct weakness," Robin agreed, watching as Luffy bound the enemy pirate captain's hands together. He tied them together with some spare bandages from Chopper, so much so that they looked like the hands of a mummy pressed together in prayer.

Over this, Luffy put handcuffs. The sight of them caused Robin to blink. "Where did the handcuffs come from?"

"Hina can release her handcuffs, and remember she took part in that last brawl yesterday? I kept one of them for a gag against Zoro and Sanji, but I figure this is a better use."

"OY!" Zoro growled, rolling his eyes.

The brawl had started during a meal and had destroyed Hina's plate, which she had taken quite a bit of umbrage to. Although afterward, she allowed Sanji to appease her with another plateful and some ice cream he had somehow made later.

As Luffy moved over to Makino to push her wheelchair along once more, Makino mused, "It occurs to me that three people do not make the pirate crew. Do you suppose the others are even dealing with the rest of this lot?"

"Probably," everyone said as one bar Luffy, even Nami pausing in her angry kicking of Porche to do so.

"That's why I was on the Den Den Mushi a moment ago as Zoro charged Foxy," Luffy smirked. "They definitely are, but I predict that Sanji can handle a shipload of weaklings like this with Laki's help."

"Unless a lot of them are women like this pink-loving idiot," Nami grumbled, kicking the moaning and nearly unconscious Porche in the head, sending her into blissful unconsciousness at last.

Zoro and Luffy exchanged a look, remembering the fiasco with Hina back in the battle to leave Alabasta. Zoro facepalmed, and Luffy shook his head. "We'll just have to put our faith in our training to get him out of acting that way towards enemies. That and Laki too."

"Let's get a move on," Nami, Makino and Robin said as one, causing both men to sweatdrop even as they rushed off, leaving Chopper to look after Tonjit as Makino and her wheelchair found themselves once more airborne.

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As a shape loomed up over the starboard side of the Resolve, Laki looked up from where she was writing out a schematic of a sniper gun, scowling, then her eyes widened as she stared at the odd ship with its fox-like figurehead. "What the hell?"

"I don't know Laki-chan," Sanji answered from where he was nearby, having been practicing some leg exercises and generally waiting for Laki to want something to eat. "But I

would assume it's trouble. Pirate ships rarely seek one another out for good reasons, and that is most definitely a skull and crossbones flying on that ship."

The ship that they had seen than came closer into the island's odd shoreline than Sanji would have expected a massive vessel like that to be able to. The thing was huge, and rather silly looking in his opinion. *A foxhead figure at the prow, fine, but why paws? Why a tail?*

As he watched, the paws at the front proved their worth. They shot out of the vessel's prow like catapult stones, slamming into the sides of the small cliff face to either side of the Resolve, clamping down there. They had to do so at an angle, since the Resolve was longer than this ship was wide, but they still trapped the Resolve within their grip, the paws still attached to their parent ship by a large iron chain.

Sanji scowled at that, pulling his cigarette out of his mouth, blowing a smoke whole as he hopped onto the railing. From there, he shouted out, "What the hell? Are you all trying to pick a fight?"

'Don't worry! What we want isn't a fight, but a duel!' a voice shouted back as people began to line the sides of the vessel. Others got up onto the figurehead at the front, all of them smirking wildly down at the smaller Resolve.

Scowling, Sanji crossed his arms, tapping one foot down the railing.

Laki joined him, hefting her rifle, now heavily modified from its original version, onto one shoulder, having finished tying up the laces on her breath dial skates. "What do you mean by a duel?" she shouted, teeth grit around her own cigarette, interest in her voice as she wondered excitedly if she was about to have her first fight as a real pirate.

The idea seemed to make being away from Sky Island seem all the more real, and she was interested to see how sky combat would match up against more normal opponents than the Straw Hat crew. She had not been impressed by the majority of the marines when Laki saw them training. Their marksmanship was markedly better than what she had been used to. Everything else about them just wasn't up to snuff in Laki's opinion.

"Our captain is currently meeting with your captain to declare a Davy Back Fight!" shouted the spokesman, who was wearing a mask that made him look something like a cartoon thief of all things. It made Sanji smile slightly, having seen that same kind of look on many a comic burglar when he was younger.

In fact, as more pirates appeared along the side of the ship, it became apparent that the mask was a theme with them, something that disturbed Laki. "Is that normal? To make your crewman dress up like that?" Laki was disgusted at the very idea.

“Not at all,” Sanji answered, waving one hand in the air. “It’s a personal, a, a, personal...” he paused, staring, hearts appearing in his eyes. One of the larger ship’s masts had a secondary platform halfway up its length. As they had been talking, a group of women had been climbing up the back of the mast, and now appeared there, coming around it like a troop of well-trained dancers, flinging out pom-poms as they shouted, “Foxy!”

Laki had not been part of the crew for very long, but she had been around Sanji for most of that time. The Shandian warrior knew precisely how he was going to react to such a thing, and a second later, Laki was not disappointed.

Sanji pirouetted around, dashing swiftly inside, before coming out with a covered tray, hopping into the air with Geppo. He completely bypassed most of the now-gawking Foxy crew and landed on the platform around the mainmast right in front of some of the women there. They all backed away quickly, eyeing him in shock and suspicion until he whipped the top of the tray off, presenting a series of chocolate cupcakes. “Ladies, I am Sanji, the cook of love! If you would please partake of my delights, you would make me the happiest pirate on earth! To have such rare beauties try my wares, such is my delight!”

As a few of the ladies began to hesitantly try his food, Laki facepalmed, shaking her head. *Did I really join the right crew here? I could’ve put up with Wyper and everyone else for a little while, wait for the next Blue Sea crew to come along.* She thought about it for a moment then shook her head. *Who am I kidding? I could barely put up with it for a night. A full day and I’d be willing to commit murder.*

“Ignoring the idiot on the platform, what is this Davy Back Fight thing!” She shouted, cupping her hands to her mouth.

Laughing, the man who had been doing the talking explained, going for pretty much the same spiel as Porche had done moments before, along with what Robin had explained. He then gestured wildly to a few of the crew been to one side. “And look here! Here are some of our newest comrades.”

One man stepped forward, holding out a large syringe in one hand. “I was the dark doctor of the Fanged Toad Pirates.

“I was the first mate and navigator,” announced another.

Finally, a slightly older man with a beard stepped forward with a laugh, throwing his arm around the other speaker. “And I was the captain, Kibagaeru!”

Throughout this, Sanji had seemed to become a little serious, grimacing angrily at what was being said, while Laki simply scowled angrily at the very idea of willingly betting friends like that. “And you expect our captain to go along with this?” Sanji inquired, becoming almost angry as he resolutely turned his back on the cheerleaders, staring down at the pirates below.

“Of course! Every pirate has heard of the Davy Back Fight, and no pirate in his right mind would ever refuse. To do so would be almost it insults to Davy Jones, and a sign of cowardice no captain could bear.”

“Besides, cook-san,” One of the ladies whispered as she pressed herself into Sanji’s back, causing hearts to appear in his eyes once more. “It wouldn’t be so bad, joining our crew, would it?”

“Of course not miss! Just call me the Foxy’s cook!” Sanji gleefully shouted, twisting around to shrieks of delight from the women and guffaws from the men fellow.

This went on until a shot rang out from Laki, a cork from a wine bottle smacking into Sanji’s head with enough force to cause him to go cross-eyed. Laki had been using cork instead of regular musket balls as she experimented with her rifle. “Oh, I’m sorry, my finger slipped. And do you want to explain to Nami, Robin and Makino that you’re leaving them Sanji?”

The thought of the ladies of the crew being bereft of his food and companionship was set against getting to know the group of ladies in front of him, and he sighed, shaking his head to clear it of the hearts that had filled them. “You might be right. Most pirates might put their pride on the line instead of putting their crewmen first. Our captain, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to have the same sense of pride as most pirates do.”

Just then, the communicator at his side made the ‘Borou, Borou’ noise of an incoming call, and he picked it up, putting the transceiver to his mouth, speaking into it. “Captain? Have you run into a group called the Foxy Pirates?”

“Yeah, we kind of are running over them right now,” Luffy answered with a harsh-sounding laugh. “Zoro and Chopper are dealing with them, with a hand from Robin.”

Sanji could hear Robin’s voice, muttering, “Oh, that was just low!” And had to agree, and not just because Robin was a woman, and therefore automatically correct in every manner in relation to anything. Still, Sanji had something more important on his mind than Robin’s deliciously throaty voice. “They’ve sort of boxed us in here on the shoreline captain. Your orders?” he asked formally.

“If you can, do whatever you want with them. Foxy is going to go down soon, and frankly, I think this entire group should be smashed.”

“Roger that,” Sanji replied, before twisting around, he was about to bow to the cheerleading pirates, but they had already pulled out weapons. The Den Den Mushi speaker had been talking to him from his waist rather than by his ear. Now they began to attack him, shouting, “Their Captain attacked Foxy! Take them out!”

“Ehhh!?” shouted several of the crew, raising more weapons and attacked. While true that the blonde was Hell Cook Sanji, he was still one man, and the woman didn’t even have a bounty. So they couldn’t be any real threat. Not to a crew of five hundred like theirs anyway. “Take them both out, then take the ship! We’ll then all go in search of Captain Foxy and the rest!”

Shots were fired towards Laki too. But she, like Sanji, was already moving, flipping out onto the midair, and skating around the vessel. This caused a lot of consternation among the Foxy Crew.

“What the heck! What is that technique, some kind of Devil Fruit?”

“No, look at her feet, she’s wearing some kind of skates, but what, how is she...”

“I want one of those,” one of the cheerleaders at the back of the group attacking Sanji muttered before Laki began to fire into the crowd of pirates on the ship, still moving around the enemy vessel, bouncing randomly through the sky, flipping and twisting.

Her shots weren’t as accurate as Makino’s, but her rifle had far more penetrating power. Gone was her simple long rifle. The rifle’s barrel had been shortened by around six inches, and the butt and trigger mechanism had been completely replaced. In its place was a lever near the butt, while an impact dial rested within the barrel, prepared by being hit several dozen times by every boy in the crew. To the side of the rifle, a magazine was set, the musket balls lined up within it so that when one fell through into the barrel, the speed of this transfer controlled by a lever. Activated by the trigger, the impact dial ‘punched’ the musket ball down the barrel at intense speeds.

Now Laki was firing as fast as she could, each musket ball going “Zip!” as it punched down into the crowd of pirates. The penetrating power of her shots was actually a little sickening, and Laki quailed as she saw limbs blown off or pirates going down with their innards ruptured. Indeed, many of her shots went through one pirate and impacted the next or even the next after that. A new cry began of “What the hell is up with her weapon!”

The former captain for the Fanged Toad Pirates started to take command at that point. “Spread out! Don’t let her shoot more than one of us at a TIAGGH!”

Unwilling to fight the cheerleaders, Sanji had simply stepped off the side of the raised platform, dropping down into the pirates below, landing directly on the former pirate captain. “Now, you all I can fight!”

With those words, Sanji flipped onto his hands as he shouted, “Anti-Manner Kick Course!” His legs spinning in an almost invisible whirl all around him, launching pirates left and right. Indeed, his kicks sent more than a few of them entirely off the ship to crash into the

ocean beyond. This, ironically, included a Fishman pirate. But with his ribs crushed by a kick that made his own super-human strength seem minuscule, this really didn't matter.

He then flipped upright, dodging to one side as a saber passed through where he had been standing, shaking his head as he saw the individual wielding it. The former captain of the Shark Tooth Pirates had leaped up over his kicks to come at him from above, attacking Sanji with a saber larger than the man was tall.

That was fine by Sanji as he had a bone to pick with this fool. "You're a pirate captain, and you were willing to put yourself and your crew on the betting block like that?!"

"Hah, what kind of pirate wouldn't put his pride on the line when called to fight another pirate?!" the former captain retorted.

"Feh, I suppose that it just goes to show how much your dreams were worth." A kick flashed forward, crashing into the man's chest, breaking ribs and hurling him off the ship. If he died in the ocean, Sanji didn't care.

"Release the Groggy Monsters! Get Pickles and Big Pan up here!" shouted someone.

In response, the nearby cargo hatch began to open, as a noise of gears working reached Sanji's ears, accompanied by some kind of song beginning to play. And from out within the depths of the ship came two giants. One of them was about half the size again of anyone Sanji had previously seen, his arms heavily muscled. The other seemed to be a mix between merman and giant, but regardless of his heritage, he was simply huge.

He stepped out of the ship and roared, bringing his hands down towards Sanji, shouting, "If you don't play fair, you become the meat in the burger!"

Before the blows could land, however, there was a shout from one side. "Lock-Lock Arm Capture!" Massive bands of metal trapped the giant's upper arms to his side moment later, Hina landed on the Giant's shoulder, looking down at the rest of the pirates below. "Is this a private party, or can anyone join?"

"Marines! It's a marine, boys! Kill her!"

Suddenly Sanji appeared amid the group shouting that, growling angrily. "How dare you, you shitty bastards! Don't you dare point your rifles at lovely Hina-chan!"

With that, Sanji began to batter them apart, smashing even more pirates away than he had been previously. Meanwhile, Big Pan thrashed, trying to pull himself out of the hold of the ship without arms, but this wasn't the normal way the two largest members of the crew exited the ship, and without his arms, he couldn't move very well.



He was forced to use his teeth, trying to bite at Hina and Sanji. This caused him to crash his head against the mainmast, causing the cheerleaders, most of whom had stayed up on the platform, to shriek in shock.

Hearing this, Sanji redirected his next attack. "You shitty fish! I'm going to fillet you. Mutton Shot!" Sanji's flying kick crashed into Big Pan's head from the side, shattering skull and jaw both.

The rest of the able-bodied marines raced onto the Resolve, grabbing up their weapons from where they had left them on the deck. Half of them moved to the aft portion of the Resolve and began to fire into the group of pirates above them, forcing Laki to fall back and give them some added suppressive fire so that they wouldn't be overwhelmed. Fullbody led several others to grab makeshift grapples and board the larger ship. Several pirates tried to close, but Fullbody smashed them aside with his iron-studded fists, shouting out, "In and at them, boys!"

The Marines themselves should not have been any more of a threat than so many pirates, simple grunts at best, easily overwhelmed by the numbers of the Foxy Pirates. However, these marines had been through a hell of a lot recently, and not a one of them could be called normal any longer. Any one marine that had survived since the Knock Up Stream was worth four of their opponents, and Fullbody was worth at least ten.

Their activity caused the pirates to split their attention, and with the giants down and the other one being battered into submission by Sanji, they couldn't protect themselves from Hina, who charged into their midst, laughing wildly. "Finally! Freaking **finally**! Pirates I want to kick the crap out of! No more moral ambiguity for this woman! Hina ecstatic!"

"Wait a minute," one of the pirates shouted as he ducked aside from a backhand blow from Hina, then leaped up desperately over a flying pirate kicked his way from Sanji. "I know her! She's Black Cage Hina!"

"What!? The dread Black Cage!? What's a marine commodore doing here!?"

"Hina would think that was obvious, Hina obvious," Hina sneered, punching one pirate so hard, his chest crumpled under the blow, as he was hurled backward with a cry of agony, while she swept her arm sideways through another man, activating her Devil Fruit powers, sending him sprawling to the ground with his arms fused to his body by one of her cages. "Hina is arresting you all."

"What kind of pirate are you!?" shouted Pickles, as he wielded his scimitars at Sanji, who kicked them aside or dodged, as need be as he backed away from the rest of the battle happening near the front four at the prow of the ship. "Travelling with marines, fighting alongside them against your fellow pirates?! Is your captain trying to become a Shichibukai!"

"There's a reason for that, my friend," Sanji answered, standing up and taking a page out of Luffy's books, alighting lightly onto one of Pickles' swords as he lit a second cigarette, taking a deep off before blowing out. "She's a woman and a dead sexy one at that. You are not."

Every male Foxy Pirate there turned and shouted, "That's it!?" as they raised a hand and slapped it to one side.

"What more reason do I need you little shits!?" A kick to the chin sent Pickles flying out over the ocean to crash into the waters nearby, his swords flying in every direction as Sanji twirled himself towards the attackers. "Bringing it on, you shitty Foxes! With the lovely Hina-chwan and the equally lovely Laki-swan, I will beat you all down!"

He then paused as he stood over the unconscious form of one pirate, sending kisses towards the cheerleaders above. "Except for you, lovely ladies. Do not worry, the knight of love, Sanji will never touch her hair on your head or allow harm to come to you!"

"Even from me!?" Laki shouted over the tumult to the battle. She was having fun using her new gun, although frankly, this wasn't exactly hard for her. Dodging like this in midair was second nature, and although the pirates had far more musket-type weapons then she was used to, that didn't mean they were very good with them. At least not good enough to hit her.

The women on the Foxy Pirates all looked at one another, then down at where nearly five hundred pirates were being taken apart, mainly by four combatants and a backdrop of seven marines. Then they remembered these weren't even the most dangerous members of the Straw Hat Crew. One of them, a tanned woman with red hair, raised her hand. "All in favor of surrendering, say aye?"

"Aye!" With that, the women shouted out, "We surrender!"

Soon after that, with Sanji and Hina in their midst and Laki floating all around and above them, the majority of the Foxy Pirates were forced to surrender or die. Dozens of them retreated into the ship, but Sanji and Fullbody went after them. By the time the rest of the pirates returned, the battle was over.

**OOOOOOO**

Looking around the battered, heavily damaged ship, Luffy shook his head. "This thing is huge. It makes the little big top look small in comparison. And a ton of resources too, right?"

"From what the prisoners say, the Foxy Pirates were basically preying on everyone that came by. They made the most important or skilled pirates from the beaten crews join them while also taking half the enemy's stores, adding to their own. They also raided on any other ship that came by. The Davy Back Fight aspect is new and highly unusual, but it certainly resulted in quite a large, very dangerous pirate crew," Hina answered this rhetorical question as she came up behind Luffy, staring around her at the badly battered ship. "And Foxy's Devil Fruit power would've made them even more dangerous if not for the fact that your swordsman figured out a way to redirect the power so easily. Hina impressed."

Luffy shrugged. If that was what Hina wanted to think, Luffy wasn't about to correct her. Zoro had instead basically overwhelmed Foxy. He was faster, stronger, and just plain better than Foxy, who apparently relied on trickery, his Devil Fruit power and preparation. In comparison to Zoro, he just didn't have the physical skills to beat the swordsman, not even with Hamburg attempting to get involved.

Better yet, it had put Zoro in a good mood, evidenced by the shark-like grin he was wearing even now as he laid out nearby, leaning against a mast as he slept. "True enough. And your crew and my newest crew member cleaned up too."

Hina sweat-dropped a little, remembering the argument between Sanji and Laki when the Foxy Pirate's cheerleading crew joined into the fight. "What pirate in their right mind would think that a group trained to be cheerleaders was a good idea! Your crew is a step forward for women's equality among piracy," she joked, pushing at Luffy's shoulder lightly as she stared at the prisoners, who had been tied up in piles near the figurehead on the prow of the ship. "This crew returns it to zero despite having so many more women among them!"

Those prisoners were very much a mixed lot. All of them had been stripped of weapons and masks, but then they had been separated into piles, at times literally given the unconscious nature of most of the enemy pirates. One group, the most heavily injured, were being seen to by Chopper, piled up on the chest of the giant Fishman.

Another, smaller group that included a few of the worst injured like Foxy, were piled elsewhere under the watch of Fullbody and the rest of Hina's combat-capable marines. This was the portion of the group that had bounties. This included both Hamburg and Porche, something that had astonished Nami immensely. "I wouldn't pay a single Beri for her, let alone five thousand!" she had shouted, appalled at the amount on the bounty poster for the other woman.

The majority of the pirates, including a few who were still conscious and those who had surrendered, most of whom were the women among the Foxy Crew bar Porche, thanks to Sanji's intervention, were in another pile. They were being watched by a group of thirteen men dressed as sailors who the marines and Straw Hats had freed from cells on the Foxy Pirate's vessel. Laki and Makino were currently with them.

Sanji had volunteered to watch them too, but everyone considered that a mistake waiting to happen and he had instead joined Nami in exploring the damaged ship. Which was more looting it down to the waterline, but no one was going to complain. No one that Luffy had to listen to anyway.

Nodding, Luffy agreed with that sentiment, before gesturing around at the ship. "You didn't answer my question, though. Do you think this thing is too big for you and your Marines to make use of? I mean, we could put their carpenters to work repairing it, so..."

Several of the prisoners nearby looked up at that, hope in their eyes, including one of the few women that had actually fought during the battle against the marines. She was a tanned woman with red hair, hair almost as red as Ranma's female form, and a workman's belt at her side. The others, too, wore carpenter belts, although their tools had been confiscated along with their weapons.

But Hina just gestured up to the massive sails of the one remaining mast. "Even if you and your crew helped us repair it, those things alone would be too much. However, we did free honest prisoners from down in the ship's hull. They said that there are a few of their victim's vessels around the island, tied up elsewhere around the island. Perhaps one of them will serve better."

"That makes sense. Do you want to go looking for those ships now? And how many of your marines do you want to stay behind on watch?"

"I will leave Fullbody in charge here and bring the two most senior marines I have otherwise." Hina winced, shaking her head as she was once more faced with the losses she had taken, which included her last sergeant, Crenly. He and Dotur, her most senior marines, had both been slain by Enel in his attack on the Resolve.

"Good enough then." Picking up a bit of debris, Luffy tossed it at Zoro's head, and Hina watched as the swordsman woke up, slicing the thing in half before glaring at his captain. "Get up, Zoro. We need to do more exploring."

Hina, her two chosen marines, Robin, Luffy, and Zoro, made their way around the island. Doing so didn't take very long, but the first ship they came upon was discarded for much the same reason as the Foxy ship. Although not as large, this ship, which was a galley – like a galleon only smaller – with a shark-toothed frog statue on its prow – would have been too large for the small group of marines to handle. With the freed sailors added in, it could be a possibility, although the sails would need replacing. Still, Hina felt it was a possibility. Perhaps not the best ship though, given it had taken some damage to its sides at some point in the past.

Moreover, the ship was a find in several other ways. It had apparently been turned into supply ship, and it had a lot of material in it, carpentry goods, nails, saws, hammers and so forth. A lot of it was already in different shapes, including the portions of a large sign with

Foxy's name written on it, and even stages of various size, like the one the cheerleaders had been strutting around on in the central mast on Foxy's ship.

"Good grief, with all of this we could almost build our own ship if we had the knowhow," Hina ruefully shook her head. "These pirates certainly took this Davy Back Fight nonsense seriously."

"Yeah, I can't believe so many pirates actually went along with that crap!" Luffy growled, shaking his head. "You think you could trust their carpenters to help you?"

"...Perhaps in return for letting them go." Hina's nose wrinkled, rather cutely in Luffy's opinion, at the very idea. "Hina annoyed. Still, it is a possibility." None of Hina's surviving crew had any kind of carpentry skills. They would be utterly dependent on the pirate crew's abilities to repair the damage to the ship or asking Luffy and his crew for more help. The choice there was obvious to her.

Rather than going further into Luffy's debt, she gestured the group to keep moving. "Let us check the next ship before we make that decision, the civilian vessel. From the description the second lieutenant among the freed sailors gave, that vessel should serve us far better. Especially since most of the sailors we freed will know how to work it already. It should be a small schooner-rig vessel."

Zoro blinked, raising an eyebrow in question. "Wait, what? Prisoners? Civilian vessel? What are you talking about?"

"She's talking about the prisoners she, Sanji and the others found in the cells on Foxy's ship. They're helping to guard the prisoners. Which you would know, Zoro, if you didn't always fall asleep on a dime," Luffy groused, smacking his first mate upside the head.

Chuckling at their interaction, Robin walked beside them, smiling slightly as she took in the territory around them. They had entered a forest area, one a little denser than the one near where the Resolve had been anchored. The trees here were several stories tall, their tops capped with an incredible canopy of dense branches, well above their heads. Beyond that, the trees were regular trees, beech, oak, acorn, Apple, even a pear tree. "Pears," she mused, staring upwards at a few of them. "We must stop on the way back for some of them."

"Right. Stocking up on fruit as much as possible would be a very good idea," Luffy chuckled ruefully.

The downside of learning and training as much as the crew normally did with Luffy was that their appetites had all grown since they had first joined him. On top of the need to feed the marines, the crew's enhanced appetites had depleted the stores they had on the Resolve, which had not been as filled as it should have been with fresh fruit and bread and other supplies

(other than shark meat) back on Upper Yard as it should have been. So Luffy was eager to refill their stores, especially since they now had the freezer and dial-powered fridges to use.

Ahead of the group, the forest opened up into a clearing. On the other side of the clearing, the ocean could be seen, showing the forest pressed into the regular cliff face side of the strange island. Moored there was a small ship. It was around half the size of the Resolve, a thing built for speed. It was the kind of ship that either a rich merchant owned and went around the ocean on, or was designed to deliver expensive goods from one island to another.

In the center of the clearing was a large stone on top of which there looked to be some kind of odd mushroom or something. Wondering if it was edible, Luffy made a note of it, as he gestured ahead of them to the ship. "Now that looks like something more along your line Hina, do you think you, your Marines and civvies would be able to handle that?" he teased.

"Hina will certainly try. That is the same kind of style that world government courier ships use, although it isn't painted as one. Small crew, which with the freed sailors we now have and extremely fast. Hina pleased," the Marine Commodore answered thoughtfully.

"Although we would only be able to transport a few of the prisoners aboard. We might not even be able to take all of the pirates with a bounty. Perhaps the other ship really is a better idea."

"I'd take Foxy, his first mate, and maybe the two former pirate captains among his crew. The rest, you can leave here," Zoro suggested, shrugging his shoulders. "Most of them are trash anyway."

"And if we take enough of the carpentry supplies, especially all the saws and nails, we could maroon them in turn. Dump them all on the island, take all the supplies we won't be taking with us and put them on the ships. Then drag their ships out a few nautical miles away and use them as target practice. I wonder, would the Foxy Pirates all fall to infighting and kill one another, or would they die of exposure before they could put up enough protection?" Robin mused.

"So scary!" both the normal marines, whose names Luffy hadn't learned, muttered, shifting away from the devil child.

Robin chuckled at that, looking idly to one side as they came around the stone heading towards the ship.

Her gasp of horror and fear caused everyone to stop, and Luffy turned to her quickly, looking at Robin's wide-eyed, terrified expression, before tracking her gaze to what had caused it.

Leaning against the side of the stone was a tall man, taller than Hamburg, although not as tall as Pickles, only far thinner than Hamburg, with nothing of the gorilla about him. He was dressed in a decent looking suit, complete with gloves and a raincoat of some kind on one arm. He had black hair in a wired, triangle-shaped afro, and skin as dark as Robin's was tanned. But the oddest thing about him was the fact that he was leaning against the stone with a sleep mask on his face. There was nothing about the man that should've terrified Robin, and yet Luffy felt it too as he looked at the man, a sense of danger, asleep, but there all the same.

The Marines also all gaped, and it was Hina's response that really set Luffy's pulse to racing. "Admiral Aokiji!"

Hearing that, Zoro instantly went for his swords, and Luffy took a stance, staring at the man in shock and rising concern. *Dammit, Gramps never did tell me what the freaking admirals looked like! Hell, it was like pulling teeth to get him to say they had Devil Fruits at all, let alone their powers.* By the time Luffy had evinced interest in knowing about the high-ranking marines, Garp had known that Luffy was going to be a pirate and so hadn't been willing to really tell them much about them beyond their names and attitudes.

Admiral Aokiji was supposedly the most laid-back one among the three, the one who apparently followed lazy justice, rather than absolute justice like Akainu. *Ice powers...well, I do have a counter for that, I suppose.*

As Hina's outburst echoed on the heels of Robin's gasp of horror, the man seems to wake up, one long thin finger pushing up the sleeping mask as he turned to look at them. His eyes widened for a moment as he looked at the marines standing next to the pirates, cocking his head to one side. But then those eyes narrowed noticeably as he saw a Robin. "Odd company you keep, Commodore Hina. Very strange indeed, a marine standing next to one of the world's most wanted criminals. I suppose I should take this moment to capture her now, shouldn't I?"

"If you think I'm going to..."

Robin's mounting anger was halted by a hand thrust in front of her face as Luffy shouted, "Robin! Calm down! You have no chance against the Marine Admiral, and you know it! He's a logia user, your powers wouldn't matter much against him, not yet," he lowered his voice then, gripping her shoulder and gently taking her away, staring into her still wide, still terrified eyes.

This wasn't the terror of a pirate faced with a marine admiral. No, Luffy realized with a sickening feeling, this was far more personal. Taking his hat off his head, he pressed it down onto Robin's head as he whispered. "Robin, come on! Calm down. You got Zoro and me here, you don't have to face this alone."

When Robin turned her eyes to him, they were still wide and afraid. Even as her mind came back online, that fear was still gripping her, changing form instead, becoming the fear of

losing Luffy, someone Robin had come to care about deeply. But when Robin looked into Luffy's fearless face, saw his teeth bared, into a dangerous little smile, the sheer confidence in that expression gave her heart.

She shuddered and nodded, closing her eyes, shaking her head several times. When she opened them, Robin lowered her arms and stepped away, putting more distance between herself and Admiral Aokiji as her hands raised to grasp at the straw hat protectively.

Hina looked on at this, somewhat disturbed by the reaction from the normally self-controlled Robin, looking between her and Admiral Aokiji. *They have some history then? What could that be?*

"Well, that was an honest reaction from Nico Robin I suppose. Although, I have to wonder if her new captain knows precisely what kind of trouble he's brought along himself," Aokiji mused. "You've made a hell of a name for yourself, Monkey D. Luffy, with beating Crocodile and Vice-Admiral Doberman. But having Nico Robin on your crew makes you a danger to the world peace, far more so than your actions up to this point."

"I know all too well about Robin and her being hounded by you people," Luffy snarled, stepping forward, his hands clenched and ready for action. "And if you're here to capture her, and then we're going to have... **problems**." Zoro moved up beside him, only to fall back to a raised hand from Luffy as he stared at Admiral Aokiji.

Aokiji raised his large, long-fingered hands. "Mah, mah, so hasty. I'm not here for Robin. I was simply on a trip, getting away from the paperwork, you know? Then I found that ship and decided to see if its owners would come back. At that point, it was such a nice day out, I decided to take a nap. I woke up, and I saw you and Commodore Hina and her two marines. Unless they're your prisoners, I'm not going to cause trouble. It's too much of a hassle."

"Lazy justice, huh," Luffy muttered, relaxing only a tiny bit. "As for why Hina and her marines are with us, that's a tale and a half, but I'll let her tell it."

"Commodore Hina regrets to inform Admiral Aokiji that she and her marines were forced to work together with the Straw Hat crew to survive," Hina said formally, saluting once more. "Our ship's rode of the Knock Up Stream, but our vessel was badly damaged, unsalvageable and sinking. I was wounded at the time, and my second-in-command, first lieutenant Fullbody, decided to make an agreement with the pirates to save what remained of our crew. That was but the start of our troubles, unfortunately. While in the sky, we stopped at the previously unknown the Sky Island and ran into a local who had apparently gone mad with power, the power of a logia."

"And your two crews were forced to fight together?" Admiral Aokiji questioned, his eyes flicking over them, resting on Robin for a moment, then Luffy, then Zoro, before returning to Hina. "And you and these two Marines are your only survivors?"



"N, no. While most of my crew did not make it, there are more still under my command than I have here with me. Three are badly wounded but being looked after by the Straw Hat's doctor. Seven able-bodied marines under First Lieutenant Fullbody are currently guarding the Foxy Pirates, the pirate crew who took this vessel. The Foxy Pirates decided to start a fight with the Straw Hats, and in the hopes of seizing their ship, or at least their supplies, we joined in. I have captain Foxy himself prisoner, as well as numerous other pirates with bounties on them. Too many in point of fact for us to transport safely in this vessel or even the other we found before this, which makes me glad to see you, Admiral. Hina glad," Hina finished, flashing Aokiji a smile.

Even as Hina spoke, though, Hina was wondering if she really was glad to see him. This was a truly volatile situation, and Hina knew Luffy's normal attitude was like a torch to a pile of gunpowder. *Am, am I worried about a pirate? Hina confused.* Hina thought, scowling as she once more acknowledged how much her attitude had changed since meeting Luffy.

"That sounds like an awful lot of work, but I suppose that for an entire pirate crew, especially of the size that the Foxy Pirates were at in the last report I was forced to read about them, I can exert myself a bit to guard their ship and force them to the nearest marine base. But you're under no further obligation to the pirates?"

"She was never under any obligation, only an agreement to not start any real fights, or try to capture us while she was in aboard our ship," Luffy growled back.

"Indeed, Hina tried to go out of her way to make certain that she did not incur further debt, her marines and Hina were always quick to join in protecting the ship and even helping to sail it."

"Which you probably found easy enough considering that that ship was once a marine vessel that you and yours stole in Logue Town." Admiral Aokiji retorted mildly, chuckling a little. "I can still remember Smoker saying something about that in his last report before he left his post there." He looked over at the ship and then moved in that direction, waving his hand vaguely for Hina and the others to follow him. The admiral reached into the water, which here came up practically to the lip of the wall that marked the edge of the island.

When he did, the water began to freeze, creating a trail of ice straight to the ship. "Go get the rest of your marines, and the prisoners you want to keep with you," He ordered Hina. "I'll head back for the others eventually."

None of the three pirates moved, watching Admiral Aokiji as Hina and her marines raced back were the way they'd come. Soon they returned with the Marines, and the eight prisoners, the only members of the Foxy Crew who had bounties besides Hamburg and the other two members of the group the Foxy Pirates had called the Monster Trio. Those three couldn't be transported so easily. This did include Foxy himself, who was still unconscious from the wounds Zoro had given. With them came the sailors who had been part of this ship's crew before it had

been attacked by the Foxy Pirates. They were all helping with the wounded prisoners or marines, two to a stretcher.

The rest of the Marines boarded the ship quickly, leading with the prisoners, then raced away, coming back further with more supplies twice more. Admiral Aokiji had mentioned offhandedly that it would be another two weeks sailing even with his Eternal Pose to the nearest marine outpost.

After about two hours, every Marine bar Admiral Aokiji and Hina had boarded the vessel, with Sanji joining the pirates. Robin had used her powers to warn the rest of the crew, and the Resolve would be ready for a quick getaway. With the breath dials, Laki, Chopper, and Nami could handle moving the ship by themselves for a short amount of time in calm seas.

Hina pointed a finger at Luffy, as the rest of the marines looked over the side of their temporary ship, conflicted expressions on their faces. "Remember what I said. Despite our agreement up there, I'm still a marine, and I am still going to be the one to capture you!"

"Bring it on!" Luffy laughed. "Just keep training, or else you'll be just as boring as Smoker. And a boring marine rival would not be worth my time."

"Mah, that was rather harsh." Admiral Aokiji chuckled at that, as Hina grinned, and turned heading towards the ship.

She boarded it and waited for the Admiral to board as well. However, he didn't follow her, simply waving her off. "I'll meet you out at sea Commodore Hina." He looked at Luffy for a moment, head cocked to one side as he ruffled his hair with the fingers of one hand.

Gulping, Hina looked as if she was about to say something, but then nodded and began to bark out orders to her crew, getting the ship moving.

Luffy tensed, part of him knowing what was about to happen. *Shit, I knew it! He was too interested in Robin!*

"You know, after Hina told me about that agreement you all made, I was going to put that along with a favor I owed Vice-Admiral Garp, and just let you all go. As dangerous as you are, Monkey D. Luffy, I do owe Garp quite a lot. But seeing for myself that Nico Robin has joined your crew, that I can't let go. That woman's knowledge is far too dangerous to let loose in this world. You clasp a viper to your chest there. Still, I do owe Garp as I said, and you did save Hina and her marines when you didn't have to. So, I will give you one chance. Give Nico Ro..."

That was as far as Admiral Aokiji got before a fist flew towards him, faster and from closer than he had expected. It was very evident that Luffy was able to use the Six Techniques and had just used Geppo and Soru to close the distance. Worse, that fist was covered with black

armor as had been reported in the fight off Alabasta. This forced Admiral Aokiji to dodge rather than merely let the blow pass through him.

The stone behind him, which he had gone back to leaning against behind him, shattered into a million pieces as the punch landed, and Luffy turned to Aokiji, glaring straight up at the taller man as Robin and Zoro prepared themselves for a fight behind him. "Robin is part of my crew! And if you think I'm going to give her up to you, you're crazier than that Enel-aho! I'm gonna snap you like an icicle, you tall fucker!"

"Yare, Yare, so hasty..." Admiral Aokiji mused, as his body began to freeze, shifting into ice.

**End Chapter**