

LOL no jinxing here.

Oda and Takashi are not my names.

This has been edited by Tomon and Hiryo. Neither are dedicated small mistake guys, but hopefully between the three of us we've kept the mistakes to a minimum.

Here is the next chapter of Stallion of the Line. Further canon divergence ahoy!!!

Chapter 13: Absolute Denied

With Cobra once more leading the way, the two royals and two pirates made their way back to the palace in silence. There was a slight smile on Luffy's face as he walked next to Robin. While he knew he should feel bad that Robin hadn't found what she was looking for, Luffy was happy with the fact that he had convinced her that she still had things to live for and that in turn had convinced Robin to join his crew.

At the same time while Robin was not smiling she was at least dry-eyed. Further, she was standing somewhat closer to Luffy than she had to as they were walking back to the palace. Occasionally because they were so close, their hands would touch, though neither noticed.

Walking behind them Vivi did and for some reason it was giving her very mixed feelings. She watched the two of them, her eyes tracking down whenever their hands touched but the group made it back to the palace without incident. They even managed to sneak inside and were halfway to the rooms assigned to the Straw Hats before they ran into anyone. Of course, the individual they ran into was possibly the worst they could have chosen for being discreet about their absence.

"Your Majesty! What is this?! I get back here of their hour ago, and you and the Princess are nowhere to be found?! Is this how you run a palace?! I've already demanded Pell and Chaka's resignations for not knowing where you went." Bellowed the newly returned Igaram, looking somewhere between frothing fury and tears of joy at seeing his king and princess.

Before the coiffed man could continue he was nearly bowled over by Vivi hugging him tightly. "You really are alive! Robin said you were, but we couldn't stop to look for you. I'm so happy to see you!"

The captain of the guard's grumpy expression melted slightly, and he patted her head fondly. "Yes well, it was a rather harrowing experience, sailing the Grand Line on my own like that. However, with the Eternal Pose to Alabasta and the supplies I was able to purloin from your pirate ship, I was able to make it safely."

The captain of the guard was interrupted in turn at that point by a blur slamming into the back of his head, sending him hurling over Vivi's head to land in a heap. Before he could try to get to his feet, he was grabbed by Sanji and Makino who had heard his words having just come out of the Straw Hats rooms.

Sanji wore an utterly enraged expression, his lips twisted into a snarl, "You bastard, stealing from us! I knew there was something off with our supplies, I thought it was that damn duck!"

Makino looked just as angry, though her anger was more based on the issues the crew had run into because of the lack of supplies rather than anger at the actual theft. "Do you any idea how much trouble you caused us!? Are you prepared to make up the times we went hungry out of your own hide!?"

"Now, now," Cobra said, trying to placate them while Vivi looked on, beginning to giggle as Robin did the same. To one side Luffy had already devolved into cackling laughter.

A few minutes later, they all joined the rest of the crew in the room they had been assigned. The king and Igaram had just left them, and Luffy was about to address the crew when the door opened, showing in several maids carrying bundles of clothing.

While Sanji began to smile and dance around them, he stopped abruptly, his face turning into one of horror as the last maid entered. Luffy simply blinked in shock at the woman backing away quickly because to his horror Igaram stood there once more in drag. "So you really did have an ulterior motive to dressing up like the Princess."

Zoro shuddered too, while Makino blanched, and Nami grabbed Chopper and backed away.

"Oh, no, you're wrong," Vivi said with a laugh. "This isn't Igaram, this is his wife Terracotta. She is chief maid and cook here in the palace."

"There's got to be a limit to how much a married couple can look alike," Nami and Luffy said as one, before laughing and smacking their shoulders together.

"I will be in charge of cooking for tomorrow night's feast, and also as chief maid wanted to be certain your clothing for the event were ready, so I wanted to stop by and make certain we had all your sizes. I thought yours was wrong at first miss, a girl your age being as... blessed is a surprise, but looking at you I can see it." Terracotta replied, looking at Nami.

Nami preened a little at that, while Luffy chuckled, fighting a blush from his face with sheer willpower as he kept his eyes on Terracotta rather than staring down at

the 'blessed' area in question.

Besides Sanji, who swooned around Nami praising her figure, the others looked on as the head maid continued to speak. "Other than that Doctor, are you going to be attending in that form? I understand you are a Zoan type like our own Chaka and Pell, but one whose size changes more than they do?"

"Er, yes," Chopper said hesitantly, staring at the woman, his own face showing none of the shock the others had felt at her appearance but a bit of curiosity of his own. *Is that hair real? It isn't moving at all when she speaks.*

"Excellent, then I'll be leaving you for now. Unless any of you have any allergies? As Hime-sama said, I'll be in charge of cooking the royal banquet tomorrow night." The middle-aged woman winked at Vivi. "It's a pity that handsome Kohza fellow won't be able to join us this isn't it? You could talk about old times together~~."

Vivi however surprised her by simply laughing and shaking your head. "I have no idea why you and the other maids always thought Kohza and I were a couple. We're just old friends."

Sanji and Luffy exchanged a glance wincing as one as Luffy leaned over whispering, "That is the harshest example of being friend-zoned I've ever heard."

Sanji nodded wordlessly then Luffy began to shoo the maids out of the room. "Thank you for your consideration, but none of us have allergies and if you don't mind the crew wants a bit of time alone thank you, we can get dressed on our own. We're all big boys and girls, out, out please."

Once the servants had left, rather huffily in one or two cases and with Sanji moaning about at least letting the maids stay, Luffy turned to Robin. "Check for eavesdroppers?"

Nodding Robin closed her eyes, conjuring up a few eyes out in the hallway on the ceiling, looking down and into the rooms all around the series of interconnected rooms they had been assigned. She looked into the rooms below them as well mindful of secret listening holes, before she pulled back her powers with a second nod. "We're clear."

With that, she removed her hat, and the scarf that she had been the using as they walked through the palace and streets to hide her identity. They had done a decent job of making certain that no one connected the Straw Hat Pirates with 'Demon Child' Niko Robin and she saw no need to tempt fate at this late date.

"Okay gang," Luffy said looking around at the others. "You all know the deal we made with Robin to help us against Croc and his crew. Well, it turns out that the Rio Poneglyph she was looking for actually isn't here. We've talked, and she's decided

to formally join our crew as a permanent member.”

Sanji cheered, throwing his hands in the air. “Excellent recruitment Luffy!”

Robin smiled at them all, grateful that Luffy had made no mention of her breakdown, leaving it to her to describe what she wished of it. Which, she was honestly surprised to admit was more than a bit. “I thought that the Rio Poneglyph was here, I had thought my life would be fulfilled if I found it. But it is not here, and I... she paused then plunged on. “I had almost thought to end it all.”

Nami reached out, grasping Robin’s hand in hers as the others nodded, with Chopper going so far as to rush over to give Robin’s leg a hug. Sanji too looked as if he would have gone for a hug, but thought better of it as the serious nature of her words sunk in.

After squeezing Nami’s hand Robin smiled at them all, her other hand dropping down to rest on Chopper’s purple top hat. “Your captain however convinced me otherwise, and I demanded that he take responsibility for that hence my joining your crew permanently.”

Robin wouldn’t tell them why she had thought about ending her life, not yet. She would not tell them about how she had lived, the World Government after her from such a young age, constantly betrayed and betraying in turn, never settling down with a crew for long, never having friends, never being allowed to let her guard down without paying for it. Robin would not tell them that she had long thought that perhaps the world would truly be a better place without her and the knowledge she carried in her head. She might eventually trust them all with that information, but such things were too personal to share right away, and frankly Robin was feeling rather emotionally drained as it was.

Nami and Makino smiled, hugging Robin in welcome. Zoro just gave her a thumbs up, having long determined that she would be joining their crew anyway. Sanji continued to dance around the room, while Chopper smiled happily, still hugging Robin’s leg. “I’m glad you’re staying with us. Who else aboard ship can I have a conversation about books with after all?”

“Hey, I read.” Makino said mock-indignantly.

“You read romance novels and newspapers, I haven’t seen you pick up a single book of any other genre,” Chopper shot back.

Luffy laughed. “The little guy’s got teeth, but on that note Chopper, how are we doing on the injury front?”

“I don’t know why **you’re** asking,” Chopper said grumpily. He had tried to figure out how Luffy was healing himself, the speed of it being so far beyond anything

he had ever heard about, even Zoro's after he had used Tekkai while moving. It made him rather cranky to have all of his medical knowledge being proven not exactly useless, but unimportant to his captain.

Still, he replied readily. "Nami's wounds are healing the slowest of course, and Zoro took several nasty sword wounds. The worst single wound however was Sanji's, the stab he took through the side. But I'm got him patched up well enough to move around as he can see. I had to operate on him though, so if he doesn't want another round of stitches and anesthesia, he should stop dancing around!" Chopper suddenly bellowed, transforming into his giant form and growling angrily at Sanji, who hopped back into bed quickly.

Chopper continued, not going back to his normal form for a moment as he looked over at Makino. "Makino had a fractured rib and a lot of bruises, but my bruise paste is working wonders already on those. She'll have to take it easy for a few days, no hand-to-hand combat or training, same with Nami. But none of them are in any danger."

He looked around, then looked over at Robin asking hesitantly "Are you sure we're alone?" he said actually whispering the words and looking a little worried.

Robin nodded, her face creased in a quizzical frown, and Chopper turned back to Luffy. "I've also been following up on your orders since we got back to the palace."

The others looked at their captain who smiled, winking at them all. "I told him to look for books on medicine or navigation in the library here in the palace and steal them."

Nami grinned, then looked over at Chopper eagerly, who in turn gestured to the bedroom the boys had taken over. As they all followed him, he went to the furthest bed and gestured underneath it, where several neat piles of books could be seen. "I've piled them up underneath there, five piles, the first three by the foot of the bed are medical books the others are navigation, and some others."

At that point the pirates realized Vivi was still there and looked at the princess, yet while Vivi looked rather shocked, she wasn't angry. Indeed after a moment the shock went away and she laughed. "We owe you all so much, you could probably just ask for whatever you need."

Before Nami could open her mouth, Luffy's hand clamped over it. "We don't need money so much as knowledge at this point," Luffy said with a grin. And somehow, I doubt the servants, the chief librarian or Igaram for example would go along with the idea of us taking these books."

"...I can't argue with that," Vivi said slowly, shivering a little as she

remembered the one time when she was younger and had returned a book to the library in a poorer condition than she had taken it out. While Vivi's father would have no issue with it, and his was the final say, there would no doubt still be issues if the theft were known. "And I suppose that you stealing them like this can also be used to show that we aren't as friendly with you, as we are, if the World Government figures out we're connected in the first place," she said slowly, frowning at the thought.

"How are we transporting them?" Robin asked clinically. There were several dozen fantasy and science fiction books she would like to take from the library here in the palace too, including an entire series called the Rainbow Mist, which she thought were fascinating though she had only read the first of them. If they really did have a means of transporting them then...

Luffy smiled. "Pick out the navigation books ya want Nami," he ordered.

Despite looking at him weirdly Nami obliged, while Makino smiled secretly behind them. *This is going to be fun.*

Both Sanji and Zoro joined the others gathering around the bed, the swordsman's eyes narrowed as he watched Luffy take one book, then stuff it into a bag. The bag was no bigger than any of the others they had been using for supplies here in Alabasta, but Luffy had infused this one with his ki that afternoon. It had slowed his healing down somewhat, but not enough for him to care.

Nami was about to say something very snarky, when Luffy took another book from her, then a third, then a fourth. When he pushed the sixth book into the small bag without it noticeably bulging, everyone's eyes began to widen.

"Another little Haki trick?" Zoro asked, leaning forward in his bed intently, gazing between the bag, Luffy and Makino.

"Somewhat," Ranma replied, wagging his hand back and forth. "I'll explain it and other techniques of a similar nature, or perhaps I should say that they are based upon a similar school of thought? Whatever. Anyway, I'll explain it once you have enough of a grounding in Haki."

Zoro nodded equably. He didn't honestly think that idea would be of much use for him in combat, but he was interested in the phrase 'other techniques of a similar nature'. Sanji too had caught that, but he wasn't blind to how easy a technique like that would make his job of buying supplies in the future.

Nami simply nodded not questioning anything eagerly taking the sack, though she looked a little nonplussed when Luffy said that he would have to hold onto it for a while. Vivi also looked rather interested, if confused, wondering how Haki could lead into something like what she was currently seeing. And Robin was definitely intrigued,

her eyes locked on the bag and Luffy, as she held one hand up to her chin, the other crossed under her chest as she thought. *Yet another mystery! Fascinating. At the present moment however this means I must make time to visit the library myself tonight.*

"While Nami's stuffing my sack here," Luffy said turning to Makino. "You said something earlier when we arrived that interested me. What's this deal ya made with Mr. 2, and why the heck did you make it in the first place?"

Makino grimaced. "I didn't really want to make that deal given how key he was to Crocodile's operations here. But in the end, I thought that perhaps adding a second ship to our breaking out from the desert island was a good idea..."

Flashback:

Makino found herself dancing backwards and around a chair, as Mr. 2 advanced, his foot shattering the chair and sending large splinters towards her. Using Tekkai she was able to take those, and then she deactivated the technique, flicking a downed lamp post in his way. Mr. 2 kicked the lamp out of his way swiftly, but not quickly enough before she was able to bring her pistols up.

Mr. 2 however rolled away, kicking up off the floor and onto a wall before coming back, dodging one of her musket balls as he did. A second later while in midair he dodged her second shot by the skin of his teeth. Not having anticipated that Makino was not able to dodge his kick which caught her hand knocking the pistol away.

A second later Makino used that selfsame hand to grab Mr. 2's foot, hurling him away to smash into the wall. By the time the crossdressing man pulled himself out of the rubble, Makino had pulled out another pistol and was cocking its lever back.

Narrowing his eyes, Mr. 2 circled around while Makino turned in place, both of her pistols ready, one cocked forward from the other in a seeming martial arts stance though Mr. 2 had never seen anything like it before.

Flicking his foot up, the man, still wearing his maid dress, hurled the top of the lamp post towards Makino, who ducked aside, then brought her guns up to block a kick as he crossed the intervening distance in a bound. A second later, they were exchanging blows in the middle of Vivi's bedroom.

Mr. 2 continued to move dancing around and using both his feet and hands to good effect. Chops seemed to be his preferred method of using his hands, along with open palm thrusts. Makino in turn used jabs, chops with her pistols, though she used her legs in a purely defensive manner.

"What's the matter?" Mr. 2 taunted, trying to get under the green-haired girl's

skin. "Can't quite keep up with me cutie? I also notice you're not using any kiiicks~~. Or are you afraid of flashing me? You don't have to worry, you're totally not my type~~."

"I'm supposed to take the word of a criminal on that? and besides, I'm keeping up with you in quite fine, aren't I? You haven't landed a real blow yet," Makino retorted. Mr. 2's taunts would never get under her skin, not after she had dealt with Luffy's attempts to teach her the 'make them mad, make them stupid' technique, as he called it.

"True but it's only a matter of time!" Mr. 2 said, trying to sweep Makino's feet out from under her. Instead of leaping over them as Sanji or Luffy would have, Makino just stepped back, lightly kicking his leg as it passed almost destabilizing his balance enough to bring her pistol down on his head.

He dodged in the last second, but still took a blow to his shoulder, and he quickly pushed with his pivot leg into a leap to get some distance between them again as she fired both pistols. Neither musket ball hit, but they came a little too close for comfort.

Still, he thought he saw a weakness just then, and charged forward, only to stop and stare as Makino charged forward to. "Don't even joooke~~! You think you can fight me in close!?"

Makino's martial arts style had been almost entirely developed by Luffy, and though we would never tell anyone, a lot of it came from watching anime shows back when he was Ranma. He called it Gun Kenpo, and it could surprise a lot of people. And while Makino could not sustain Busoshoku for very long, she could infuse it into small objects, like her pistols. She knew that was an endurance intensive skill however, and knew she needed to end this fight before Mr. 2 could wear her out.

This was why Mr. 2 began to grimace as they exchanged blows and he nearly collapsed over the barrel of one of Makino's pistol which smashed barrel end first into his chest, its tip glowing black. He felt a few ribs go, but he had moved with just enough of the blow to avoid more serious damage, and in return his own palm thrust caught Makino in the face. She staggered back, having been unable to use Tekkai and Busoshoku at the same time.

Mr. 2 tried to press in, but she quickly brought her pistols up in a cross, blocking his kick. The impetus of it still threw her out the doorway and down the hall skidding along the floor however. Mr. 2 followed swiftly, but Makino dropped her two spent pistols, reached into her pouch from which she pulled out two more, cocking them both but firing only one.

Mr. 2 twitched aside ducking behind the doorway. "Don't even Joke~~!" he shouted once more. "How many of those guns to you have?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Makino said, a confident smirk on her face, one she had seen Shanks, Luffy and even Garp use on more than one occasion.

Actually, the two pistols Makino had in her hands right then were her last. Not having enough of a reserve of her own Makino couldn't use Luffy's ki expansion technique as well as he could, so there was a limit to how many pistols she could carry.

With that and her body feeling somewhat exhausted, Makino knew she was also slowly losing this fight. Her endurance was simply not up to fighting Mr. 2 for this long, and he was dodging enough of her own attacks to stay in the game long enough to wear her out. Her use of Busoshoku, while quite good, tired her out all the more.

Mr. 2 suddenly bounded out of the door hurling the sofa from Vivi's room at her, and forcing Makino backwards. He kicked off one of the hallway's walls, then up onto the ceiling trying to make certain that Makino couldn't get a bead on him as he advanced toward her.

Before Makino could set her feet again Mr. 2 was on her, and several hard blows landed before she got her defenses up, though she was able to move with him enough that none of them were truly debilitating. In return a hard pistol whip to his sternum sent Mr. 2 backwards, grimacing in agony as they hit aggravated his already broken ribs, and the two continue to exchange blows there in the corridor dancing down it as Mr. 2 tried to press his advantage, but couldn't quite break Makino's defenses now. But he was weakening her, and he knew it.

Makino decided to use some psychological warfare to see if she could get through to her crossdressing opponent. "I have to wonder what line Crocodile fed you that would lead you to willingly sacrifice yourself for his ambitions," she said, almost conversationally.

"What are you talking about?" Mr. 2 shouted, kicking one of her hands upwards. But this time Makino kept her grip on her weapon, and her other pistol came up in a short jab to block his follow-on punch, carrying it to the side and twirling with it while bringing down the hand he had kicked around in a blow towards Mr. 2's head, which he blocked in turn.

"I mean," Makino grunted, pulling back from that attack quickly to block another series of jabs and kicks. "That Crocodile was never going to let you live. He had a bomb set up in the city to wipe out both sides of this conflict, as well as all his agents here of course."

"Don't even joke~~!!!" Mr. 2 shouted. "Zero-chan would never do that! He

needs us all too much.”

“Why would he need you?” Makino asked, injecting a tone of honest confusion into her voice, even as Mr. 2 began to press her even harder. He was however somewhat too reckless, and her next jab caught him in the shoulder. That threw off his pace enough for her to back away, bringing up her still loaded pistol. He dodged, smashing open a door with his injured shoulder, and Makino growled but pulled her finger back off the trigger.

Nonetheless she went on speaking only shouting the words now. “Your role in this is done, isn't it? Why would he need someone of your talents now? If he succeeds why would he share any part of his scheme with anyone let alone you? When, for that matter, has Crocodile ever treated his followers like they were important? Or did you really not know that he sent two of your fellow agents, Mr. 7 and his partner, on a suicide mission?”

“What are you talking about?” Mr. 2 said once more, not showing himself but sounding much calmer now if still angry. Even his accent had become less obnoxious. “I haven't seen those two in a while, but that's not proof they were sent on a suicide mission by Zero-chan.”

“They were here in the clock tower by the plaza with a bomb. It was loaded in a cannon, and I imagine they thought they would have to shoot it off. But when we examined it the bomb was also on a timer. Crocodile evidently believes in redundancy in his plans and leaving no witnesses. Surely you've heard some rumors to that effect as you were sneaking through the palace.” Makino replied.

Mr. 2 narrowed his eyes. He had heard something about a bomb being discovered, but he thought it was something to do with the rebels or maybe a backup plan for if his tasks had failed. But this was sounding as if Crocodile was willing to sacrifice both Mr. 2 **and** his crew, who had taken over a lot of the spy slots here in the capital.

This was true, in a way. Crocodile had been willing to sacrifice all of them: his other agents in both armies and the Mr. 7 pair. Mr. 2's death would have been regrettable, given how useful he was, and Crocodile had anticipated he at least would have left the city with his captives. But if Mr. 2 had died, Crocodile would not have mourned it.

“And the Marines are here too,” Makino went on mock-helpfully. “Lead by a captain Hina. The ‘Black Cage’ I think she's called. How exactly do you see this ending, Mr. 2? Is this fight really worth your life now?”

Mr. 2 fell silent, thinking hard. He knew he was pretty battered at this point,

even if he thought he had hurt the green-haired woman almost as much. The idea of fighting a Marine captain, especially one with Black Cage's known abilities, was not one he wanted to contemplate. And if Crocodile had betrayed him or at least planned for his death and the death of his crew, that changed things. "What are you offering?" he said finally.

"If the Marines are here, my own crew might be trapped on this island if they have enough ships nearby, and Black Cage is known for that maneuver." Or at least she was according to what Makino had found out since they landed in Alabasta. She had never heard of the woman before that aside from a few comments from Garp about how she was a good Marine.

"Two ships are better than one?"

"Exactly. Two crews are better than one as well. And it gets us both out of here alive."

Mr. 2 tapped one finger against the wall, before waving his hand out of the corridor. "I'm coming out, don't shoot at me greenie-chan~~."

Makino nodded, backing away slightly, both of her pistol still raised in the air, ready to be brought down and fired, or so Mr. 2 was supposed to think. She only had one still armed.

Mr. 2 held out a small short range den-den mushi, the sight of which made Makino twitch as the thought *I can't believe we forgot about those*, went through her head. "I want to check your story about the Marines being here, and that rumor about the bomb. If it checks out, I'll agree to that plan."

End flashback

"Of course the rumor did check out, as did Black Cage Hina being here, so we made the deal. I'm not certain if he would've gone for it if he also didn't have a crew to worry about, but I think that actually speaks in his favor." Makino said with a shrug.

"But then why were you chasing him out the window?" Chopper asked innocently, causing the others to look at Makino in question.

"Oh, that." Makino said blushing and not making eye contact with anyone. "Let's just say he said something very rude to me and things escalated from there. 'You're not so bad for an old woman with fat hips' indeed," she huffed to herself, heard only by Robin, who chuckled. Makino glared at her and Robin quickly fell silent, miming zipping her mouth closed.

Nami looked at Robin too. "What's your opinion on Mr. 2? Can we trust him?"

"Mr. 2 is trustworthy if rather gullible." Robin replied promptly, moving on

from her amusement at the other woman's anger. "He is also a very tough fighter, and quite adaptable. His crew is also devoted to him, even if they do partake in some of his oddities," she finished with a shudder.

"Cross-dressing or just dressing up?" Makino asked tiredly.

"Ah, no. Mr. 2 generally goes around dressed like a ballerina when not in disguise, and his crew do as well. Even for pirates they are... highly unusual," Robin replied.

For a moment the room was silent, then Luffy gagged, and both Sanji and Zoro spat to the side. "I'm going to need a lot of liquor to get that image out of my head," Zoro said, both of the other boys nodding agreement. Even the girls looked a little green in the gills.

"Well that's a good thing I suppose..." Vivi said dubiously. "His crew at least will help you all to get away once the marines learn you're leaving Alabasta. I wish there was more we could do but..."

Luffy shook his head, moving over to clap a hand on her shoulder. "It's not a problem Vivi. The moment we spotted Smoker and Hina we knew we might run into issues getting away. Besides, it's a pirate's lot in life to be chased. And you can't afford to bring more World Government interest down on your head or Alabasta."

"I know, it just feels so wrong to not help you all after what you've done for us." Vivi replied.

"Don't worry about it," he said again, shaking her by her shoulder for a moment. "Besides, it was more what we did for **you** than what we did for Alabasta." The other pirates all nodded, adding their words of agreement to Luffy's.

Vivi flushed, looking away from Luffy for a second. "Thank you," she whispered, then shook her head as Luffy stood back, moving over to reclaim his bag from Nami. "I should go get ready for this evening. I'll see you all at the feast." She smiled at them all, exchanged a high five with Chopper in his monster form, and left.

Luffy locked the door behind Vivi and waited a few moments before looking over at Robin and then the others. "Now that Vivi is gone, let's talk about the elephant in the room: the sand-sand fruit. It would paint an even bigger target on us than we already have after killing Crocodile in the first place, but it would be **seriously** useful to have an logia type in our crew. So, does any of you want it?"

"I don't want it," Nami said, holding up her hands in an X in front of her face. "It's not my style at all."

She glared at Luffy, who decency to look abashed, pulling at his pigtail for a moment under his Straw Hat. She had smacked him and rightly so for pushing her

into the fight as he had. He hadn't anticipated that she would face Miss Doublefinger alone which has been a mistake, but she had won at least.

"I'm sorry," Sanji said. "I can see the utility of it, but no. I have a single Devil Fruit out there that I want, that I have pledged will be mine if I ever come across it, and I won't eat another. Besides," Sanji went on, ignoring the questioning looks everyone was shooting him. "I like to swim too much to take on a Devil Fruit. What about you? You're the captain, shouldn't you get the fruit? And what about the national treasure?"

Zoro and Luffy both exchanged glances, before shaking their heads. "Not my thing either." The swordsman said. "I'm a swordsman, not a melee fighter, and a devil fruit would just get in the way of that. And frankly it'd feel like cheating."

"It's not my kind of style either," Luffy said with a shrug. "Oh, some of the powers it's got are interesting, but what I can already do at least parallels a lot of them, so I don't really see the point."

He looked over at Makino who shook her head quickly. "I don't want it, I will never be a front line combatant, and have no wish to be one. And given everything else we've done here to put us in the WG's crosshairs, I don't think adding another reason for them to send powerful forces after us would be a good idea. I'd like to give it to Vivi honestly."

"That was my thought as well," Luffy said with a nod.

"Wait, what?" Robin asked, incredulous. "I realize you've done all of this friendship's sake, but even taking on a Shichibukai is different from giving that Shichibukai's devil fruit to someone else."

"Vivi's the princess of a desert kingdom, who could use it easily in an environment where the Sand-Sand Fruit is at its most dangerous. Her nation could also use a major injection of military power," Luffy said calmly. "Unless one of you wants it, we'll go with that idea. Then she could be a real 'desert' princess," he said with a laugh.

"I would recommend that she wait to eat it for a while," Chopper said clinically. He had no opinion either way, since both Makino or Vivi taking the fruit would help the crew get stronger. "There's no way to know what it would be like to start using after all, and Logia Fruits are known to produce very odd reactions once ingested."

Robin looked around at the others but Nami, who had looked a little irritated at the idea of not using the Sand-Sand Fruit themselves, nodded firmly. She and Chopper were closest to the desert princess of them all, and thus would be the one's missing her the most if Vivi stayed behind.

Looking over at Luffy, Nami decided to broach that very subject. “She could use it, and it really would be a help. I’m going to miss her terribly if she decides to stay,” she said, narrowing her eyes at Luffy, who refused to take the bait. She scowled, then asked bluntly “So is Vivi going to leave with us?”

“That’s up to her,” Luffy said, shrugging his shoulders. “I won’t tell you not to try and recruit her but I don’t see it happening. This whole kingdom is her treasure after all, I can’t see her leaving it behind.”

Robin smiled, shaking her head as the image of a chibi Vivi trying to stuff all the sand up in Alabasta into her pockets came to mind for a moment. Sanji looked at her quizzically, his one visible eyebrow rising in question, but Robin did not reply. Instead she moved over to the clothing the maids had brought, intent on trying them on and seeing what Makino could do to hide her identity yet still let her be able to eat at the feast tomorrow night.

OOOOOOO

Smoker leaned back in a chair on his ship, the same one that he had commandeered back in Logue Town from a jumped up little lieutenant who had thought his iron plated fists meant he could talk back to a captain. Smoker couldn’t remember the man’s name at the moment, and frankly couldn’t care. Instead his attention was fully on the Den-Den Mushi in front of him, which was currently relaying orders from headquarters. “The investigators from the World Government will be there within a week. They will also be accompanied by a high-ranking Admiral. It has not been decided on who just yet.”

“That’s fine and dandy for the future, but what about right now?” Smoker said, knowing in his gut he wasn’t going to like this.

The other end of the Mushi was silent for a moment before beginning, its voice steely. “Crocodile’s death will be attributed to the Marines. The depths of his betrayal as a Shichibukai will be investigated, and you and Captain Hina will receive full commendations along with the brevet ranks of Commodore.”

Nearby Tashigi stiffened with anger. “But that’s not,” she began, only to silence herself as Smoker held up a hand.

The voice from the other end went on, explaining how they were going to cover up what really happened as both of his listeners became angrier and angrier.

“Now wait just fucking minute!” Smoker bellowed, his loud voice overriding the other man’s for a moment. “You want to give **us** credit?! You want to make **us** the

good guys? When there are dozens, possibly even 100 witnesses to the fact that I was unconscious when Crocodile died? When it was never a Marine who found out his duplicity? Instead of trying to own up to our failures, you want us to cover that up?!"

"The pillars of the world cannot be shaken!" The voice on the other line snapped. "This is an order from the Gorosei itself. "Nothing about the battle between Crocodile and this Straw Hat Luffy will ever be allowed to worry the public mind. And we will stop his rise now."

"And you just want me to go along with this, toe the fucking party line? You can eat shit!" Smoker bellowed into the receiver, clicking it down and hurling himself out of his chair before stalking out of the room angrily.

Tashigi followed him rapidly, looking just as incensed as her boss. She hadn't wanted to really admit it, but the Straw Hat pirates had been the ones truly fighting the good fight here in Alabasta, and the Marines... hadn't. Indeed, they had just gotten in the way, though Tashigi felt that her own part in the battle at Rain Dinners at least helped the Straw Hat Pirates somewhat. "Will they really be able to cover it up?"

"There were no witnesses to Crocodile and Mugiwara's battle out in the desert," Smoker said sighing wearily. "They'll be able to cover up that aspect at least for a while. At least until people start connecting the dots and realize I was unconscious when Croc must have died. But if they can silence Mugiwara quickly enough, they might be able to get away with it."

He sighed. "The rest, well I suppose they'll probably try to use you as the woman who shouted about how Crocodile had Dance Powder stored in his casino over the PA system. How that will take in Alabasta I don't know, but it will be believed internationally."

"This, this feels wrong," Tashigi said, frowning. "I realize that the Straw Hat Pirates are still Pirates, and I will try my hardest to bring them to justice, but..."

"I know," Smoker growled. "I feel like they fought the good fight here too, but they're a threat. With the skill of that bastard Mugiwara, the first mate and even Black Leg, they're a big fucking threat to world peace, that hasn't changed. Don't forget that a pirate is still a pirate Tashigi." Well, that and the humiliation of having been beaten by the same pirate three times now but left alive afterward. That disdain, that contempt galled Smoker.

With that thought in his mind he waved Tashigi off. "Go out and blow off some steam. I'm going to call Tsuru-sama personally, as the Chief of Operations she'll be able to tell us what kind of help they're going to send us without forcing me to become further embroiled in the WG's machinations. Whatever happens the Straw

Hats won't escape Alabasta waters."

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The next evening, the Pirates were led into the throne room which had been set for the feast. A single long table filled the room from one end to the other. All along the walls there were guardsmen smiling at them, slamming their ceremonial spears into the ground in salute as Cobra shouted out a welcome to the heroes of Alabasta. To one side of the throne room was a small band, a local orchestra of some kind, or perhaps the royal family's own musicians.

Luffy smiled, bowing and whipping his Straw Hat off his head, which he was still wearing despite having gotten dressed up in a decent looking suit for the evening. The others were similarly well-dressed, though Robin again was wearing a disguise thanks to Makino. On her head she wore a turban, her skin had somehow been darkened with some kind of cosmetic, and her eyes had contacts in them changing their color to a dark black.

Looking around, Luffy really didn't think they were worth all this cheering. It wasn't as if they had set out to save the country after all or at least not to actually do so. They had saved it because it had allowed Luffy to challenge a Shichibukai, and they had all wanted to help Vivi.

The pirates were quickly led to the table as Cobra smiled at them all, clapping his hands once they were all sat down. At this signal servants came in carrying piles and piles of food. Music started up in the background too the moment the king finished speaking, slow, haunting music almost, which Vivi said was called 'Ode to the desert moon'. It was something of a favorite of her father's.

At first the dinner was a rather stilted, formal affair but about five minutes into the meal Luffy decided to liven things up. With that in mind his hand flashed forward grabbing a chicken leg that Zoro had been about to take from a serving platter.

"Oy shitty captain I was about eat that!" Zoro shouted.

"Speed training Zoro," he said with a laugh. "Ji-kure trained me in the same fashion." And he had too, not up to the level Genma had in Ranma/Luffy's past life, but still to a level he could use as an excuse for his little joke. "Let's see how you measure up. Loser goes hungry."

"Garp did indeed do that, but I thought I trained you out of doing so in public!" Makino said, practically growling the words at Luffy's sudden desire to ignore her lessons on proper manners.

“Meh” Luffy said, wrinkling his nose at her. “This party’s a little too dead for my liking anyway, have to liven it up somehow.”

“Indeed!” Cobra said with a laugh of his own. “Play something more upbeat please, and all of you, don’t be so stuffy!”

After that, the feast went much more playfully, with everyone talking and joking together now that their Captain had set the tone, not even Makino and Nami trying to act decorous in the king’s presence. When Igaram and Chaka tried to object, Luffy suddenly disappeared from his seat, only to appear standing lightly on top of their heads one foot on either of them.

“Lighten up you two,” he said, being very careful not to put any actual weight on them. Both of them would later wonder how the hell he had done that, but it was a secret of the Aerial Style of Anything Goes and Luffy wasn’t about to share it. “This is a party! Have fun!” he ordered, before flipping off of them both and landing back on his chair with a thump, crossing his feet and putting them up on the table for a moment as he grabbed a plate of food.

Zoro turned glaring at Nami, slamming his mug down. “It’s time we settled things witch! I challenge you!”

Nami grinned, waving her own empty mug at one of the nearby servants. “Bring it on sword boy!”

Laughing Luffy reached over and pulled Sanji out of his chair between the two of them, holding him in the air as Zoro moved over so that he was facing across the table from Nami before plunking the chef into Zoro’s old seat. “So, tell me more about your fight with this candy man.”

Listening in on what Robin and Sanji told him, Luffy had to hold back a frown. *So this guy was really a Marine at one point? That’s not good. Dealing with the Shichibukai is one thing, but dealing with him and a former Marine traitor? That’s like doubling down on an already dangerous bet. I thought before this that they would send someone to back up Hina and Smoker after they heard about me killing Crocodiles, but on top of killing him we’ve taken out a blight on the Marines like Gasparde? They could send a Commodore or even a Vice-Admiral.*

I suppose I could fight a Vice-Admiral, but if they send a full Admiral, even as I am now there’s no way I could fight one of them on an even footing. Not if I didn’t break out the sealed techniques and even then I doubt I could win.

Luffy was brought out of his thoughts as two small hands grabbed his upper arm pulling on him. He looked up to find Vivi smiling at him and she let go of his upper arm with one hand to wave to the musicians, who had just started up a lively air.

Others had moved up from the table and were moving over to a small cleared area to one side. “Come on and dance!” Vivi shouted over the noise.

Smiling Luffy let himself be pulled to his feet and out onto the dance floor, dancing around with Vivi for a bit. Deep thoughts could wait until later.

OOOOOOO

Black Cage Hina was irritated, and did not care who could tell as she stomped over the docks to Smoker’s purloined galleon. Her own ship was still out to sea, part of the cordon that she had thrown up around the island. It wasn't a blockade as most landlubbers would think but rather spaced out schooners sailing around within sight of every river and port. The galleons, her main strike force, were anchored a ways out from that in small reaction groups that could move to cover any bit of the coastline once they were called in.

That however was not on Hina's mind at the moment. What irritated her at present was that Mr. 2 had escaped. He had run into a crowd of returning soldiers on the outskirts of Alubarna, and then used his ability to simply blend in for a few moments. She had lost him then and hadn’t been able to hunt up any of his crew either by the time she had started looking for them.

She paused as she reached the wharf leading out to Smoker’s ship, staring at where Tashigi had been busily hacking apart several old crates with her sword given the amount of jetsam tossed very which way. Tashigi was sitting down leaning against a pier gasping in air, her sword set into the wood to her side.

“I take it I'm not the only one who has had a bad day? Hina frustrated.” Hina said moving toward the younger woman.

The younger woman looked up, then blinked and hopped to her feet, standing on wobbly legs as she threw a quick salute. “Captain, I’m sorry I didn’t see you there.” At Hina's amused look, Tashigi mellowed quickly. “And yes, the World Government got in contact with us, and told us to go along with the cover story they want to use to hide what really happened here.”

Hina very carefully hid a wince at that. If the World Government was going to put a cover story in place that meant they were possibly willingly to execute anyone who tried to tell a different story. *Not good, they must be very worried about Crocodile's death.* Even busy as she had been in the capital Hina had heard about the discovery of Crocodile’s body, and had time to think about the ramifications of it. “Has there been any report about his devil fruit?”

"I'm afraid not," Tashigi said. "I think that might be making the World Government's response worse than it would've been otherwise."

"That's an understatement," Hina said with a rather grim chuckle. She cocked her head indicating the other woman should walk with her back up to the ship, and the swordswoman fell into step beside Hina. "The World Government doesn't like logia type fruits to be in the hands of anyone besides themselves."

The two women soon joined Smoker in his room, where Tashigi immediately moved through the room with practiced ease before opening a porthole on the other side to let out the smoke. "What're you doing you katana-baka?" the voice of Smoker said from somewhere inside the smoke that filled the room from deck to ceiling.

"You're the only one that can actually breathe in such an environment Smoker," Hina said, waiting outside as the room cleared. "And is there a reason you decided to make our communication room into a smokehouse? Hina disturbed."

Growling angrily Smoker bit down on his cigarettes, before spitting them out to one side. He took a long drag then replied in a clipped angry tone, going into detail on what Tashigi had told Hina earlier.

Hina took it a lot more calmly than Smoker did. Unlike Smoker, who was a protégé of Aokiji, the admiral least interested in politics, she had dealt with a lot more of the World Government policies in person and didn't like many of them. But she also knew that unless she wanted to turn pirate herself, there was little she could do about it.

As such, she had determined to follow her role model, Tsuru's, example and work her way up to where she could truly begin to influence Marine policy if not the World Government's. It hadn't been working so well so far. *This might not have been the way I wanted to gain the rank, but I'll take what I can get.* "What help are we getting immediately?"

"Vice Admiral Doberman should be here by midmorning tomorrow. He's the only one that was close enough to respond quickly, but we also have four Commodores coming in within three days after that. Between us and their squadrons, we should be able to deal with this upstart Straw Hat crew if we can bring them to battle. We just need to keep them here or in sight at a minimum until then."

Both women nodded at that however Hina had to suppress a wince. Doberman was not her favorite person in the world. He had made passes at her in the past, nothing she could call him on, but enough to irritate. "So we need to hold them this night, and into the morning at a minimum? We can do that. Hina determined."

"I'd agree with that," Smoker said puffing thoughtfully on two new cigars before going on. "If I was certain that Doberman alone would be enough to stop Mugiwara."

To that, neither woman could say anything.

OOOOOOO

About an hour after the feast had finished, Luffy and his crew were shown into the Royal baths. These were truly massive, two-story tall edifices, the layout of which sort of looked like a mix between Arabic and Roman in design. Luffy liked it immediately, primarily because the water was all hot, something that made Sanji pout noticeably until Luffy caught his eyes, sending Sanji looking away quickly.

Luffy chuckled under his breath, unheard thanks to the sound of the water. He couldn't control someone's perverted thoughts, much as he could wish to. *So long as the flirty-chef doesn't try anything he gets to keep his dangly bits.*

Nodding to Zoro Luffy moved to the back of the room, quickly dunking themselves in the bath, before sitting underneath the heated waterfalls that had the bath in an effort rotating cascade. Zoro seemed to think about joining him, but instead moved over towards Chopper. "I'll get your back if you get mine?"

They both looked up however as the fog of the bath cleared and the camel that they had used in the desert come into view. "What the hell is that thing doing here?" Zoro growled, wishing he had his swords on him.

The camel began to make noises while Chopper translated, not trying to change his voice this time. "Apparently Eyelashes followed us here, and has decided to stay. One of the maids let him in, and he found his way here."

"Freaking strange camel," Zoro muttered. He then blinked as Sanji and Eyelashes perked up when the sounds of laughter from the female side of the baths reached them. "Ero-alliance..."

Deciding to ignore this for now, Luffy sat in a meditation pose as he allowed his thoughts to drift back to the fight with Crocodile. *All around I think I was able to fight him pretty well. The only thing that threw me was that damn water draining thing of his. Take that away, and the only issue would've been the poison, but Robin helped me deal with that.*

He spent a few seconds thinking warm thoughts towards the woman who had made the fight that much easier. *Everything else he threw at me I was able to overcome. But, I made a lot of mistakes there.* Luffy thought grimly. *I should've*

used the jutte and more of my 'Ranma' techniques right off the bat rather than trickling them in, although the ki blasts wouldn't have worked.

Luffy's ki blasts hit like pile-driving force rather than like some kind of energy beam, there was impact rather than searing heat in the strikes. And ki attacks had nothing in them that could cancel out a logia type's ability to disperse.

That was a surprise, Luffy reflected. The fact that he used Observation and was able to anticipate my punches enough to move out of the way even when my fists and feet were infused with Haki made the fight a hell of a lot tougher. His distant attacks were also better than mine I guess, though my slight edge in speed mean I could cancel them out. His speed... he couldn't match my Amiguriken, but his base speed was a lot closer than I'm happy with and his Observation canceled out the rest of my advantage there.

Physical strength... we never really tested that. I was surprised he couldn't also use Busoshoku, but I suppose that the number of people who can use both types is small. Maybe I'm being a little too ambitious to think that my whole crew will be able to use one or the other eventually.

Still, it's plain that I need to start reincorporating more of my 'Ranma' techniques into my style. I want to keep the Sealed Techniques in reserve, I don't want to use them until I have to against an Admiral or similar enemy. But anything else is fair game.

Luffy's thoughts were interrupted when the door to the men's side of the baths opened and the king came in, followed by Igaram. The two of them joined Sanji and the others in the main pool and Sanji smiled. "Bathing with a King, we pirates really have come up in the world."

They all laughed at that, then Sanji asked the question that should not have been asked, yet was so obvious Luffy kicked himself for not seeing it coming. Moving through the water to Cobra's side he nudged the king with an elbow, smirking around his ever present cigarette. "So, where's the women's bath?"

Igaram bristled, his hand coming down in a chop on the back of Sanji's head. "How dare you, the princess is in there!"

"It's over here!" the king said, actually exiting the water to point dramatically to the top of the wall on the right side of the bath from the entrance.

"Woohoo, king-sama, you understand the good things in life don't you!" Sanji said scrambling out of the bath quickly followed by Eyelashes as they moved to join Cobra.

"Hey you bastards don't you dare!?" Igaram shouted and Zoro shook his head

as even Chopper moved to join them looking a little confused but going with the crowd. Luffy didn't, instead simply closing his eyes and shaking his head sadly.

On the women's side of the baths Vivi was smiling as Makino began to play with her long hair, working in some shampoo while Robin did the same for herself, and Nami lounged in the bath nearby, her arms propped on the side of the bath and her body floating on the water as Carue swam around the bath. Smiling up at the ceiling Nami had just wondered aloud up what they would see next, stating that she hoped they wouldn't face any more action for a while.

"I can't even imagine!" Vivi said. "We've seen a city-sized whale, dolphins the size of ships, flying fish that sang. Fought another pirate crew and saved an island. We met and brought into the crew a reindeer that can talk and met a healer witch who lived on a snow mountain. All the while you apparently fought the ex-king of Drum Island and helped Dalton-san install a new government!"

Vivi had heard about the battles on and around Drum Island and immediately remembered when she had met Dalton and Wapol before at the King's council. There she had taken Wapol's smacking so as to keep the peace between their countries and not take away from her Father's stance on the issues being discussed there. Vivi had taken a certain amount of vindictive pleasure that the crew she was a part of had dealt with him in such a manner.

"And on top of that you then saved my own country!" Vivi exclaimed happily, her eyes having begun to shine brightly as she talked about their adventures. "I have to wonder how much more adventure there is out there, what is beyond the horizon! I'm envious of you all for being able to go out there and see it."

Nami and Robin looked at her, lips twitching and amusement, while Makino continued to smile at the girl's back as she worked her hands through her hair. She noticed the girl's speech was a little bit disjointed as all of them save Robin had drunk at dinner.

This did not mean that they did not hear the rustle of the boys climbing up the wall and staring over at them.

Makino reacted quickly, grabbing the startled Vivi around the waist, and pulling her backwards off of her stool and into the water with her. At the same moment Robin summoned up a wall of limbs to protect her modesty.

Nami however smiled calmly, standing up and pulling her bath towel around herself, "Men!" she said, turning in the direction the law. "That will be 50,000 dollars each! Happiness **Punch!**" With that, she undid her towel flashing the boys.

"Nami-san!" Vivi shouted, her face a bright red as she stared at the other girl.

Makino simply shook her head, while Robin sighed theatrically, dissipated her protective wall of arms as Sanji and the others flew back on geysers of blood which exploded from their noses, even Chopper for some reason. All of them landed on their backs on the other side of the wall, but you would have had to perform torture to remove the grins on three of the four faces.

"You didn't have to do that you know," Robin said mildly getting back into the bath. "I could have easily summoned up a few hands on the wall and..." She clenched her hand in a very dramatic and violent manner and Nami giggled while Makino smirked and Vivi smiled in approval.

Nami shrugged. "Honestly, it was just as easy this way. Still it's a little irritating that Luffy and Zoro weren't there. I would've liked to have made a clean sweep."

Robin frowned cocking an eyebrow at her. "You wanted more people to see you naked? You could go over there and correct that if you are so inclined."

Nami looked over at Robin, her eyes narrowing, before she rolled her eyes dramatically trying to lighten the mood which had suddenly become a little too serious. "Oh god no, not another prude."

Robin stood up in the bath, letting the water cascade down her body, her very voluptuous body Nami noted a little irritably as she felt her throat tighten. The older woman had a slightly better figure than Makino or Nami in the waist area, and her bust size was a little intimidating to Nami despite her own impressive curves. She knew she'd catch up and possibly sooner rather than later, but she hadn't yet.

As Robin advanced Nami found herself backing through the bath until her back slammed into the side of the wall, and Robin reached forward, drawing a finger down the side of her neck to her collarbone sending a shiver up Nami's body. "I am far from a prude," Robin said softly, "but I am very picky on who I allow to see my body."

With that she stood back, ducking down into the water and moving back towards the opposite wall. "You need to watch out lest you get some offers you won't like."

"Offers don't bother me," Nami said shaking her head and trying to fight back a blush the other woman's teasing had evoked. "I've dealt with that kind of crap my entire life."

"They should!" Makino interjected causing Nami to scowl but going on quickly. "I wouldn't have put the point so bluntly, but you need to realize that you don't need to use your wiles as weapons any longer Nami. That kind of thing **will** get you in trouble down the line especially if you do it without one of the crew around. On the

Grand Line you're more likely to run into pirates that won't fall for your tricks and might simply attack you if they think you're just trying to play hard to get."

Nami winced at that, but slowly nodded. "I'll try. But some habits are harder than others to break, and, and I'm **proud** of my body dammit!"

"Being proud is one thing, giving off an air of someone who is easy is a different thing entirely." Robin replied. "Or do you think the clothing I prefer doesn't put my body on display just as much as yours?"

Vivi remained silent throughout this quarrel, uncertain what to think. She honestly would've loved to be as confident about her body as Nami was, but she could also see Robin and Makino's point. "Let's set this aside for now," she said, smiling bravely at them all. "So Nami, did you want to take any of the clothing I showed you earlier? Makino-san, I think you said you could tailor some of it?"

"Those formal dresses for certain. I'd like to make certain we have some disguises as well." Makino said going along with the change of subject without argument. Soon enough the conversation was once more moving in a more friendly manner and a far less serious one.

Over in the men's bath Cobra reached up to his nose, wiping away the blood which had exploded out of that orifice at seeing Nami's young and incredibly gorgeous body on display like that. "I thank you."

Luffy looked up from where he was still meditating to join in the chorus of "Ero-jiji!"

"Not for that!" the King shouted then looked at them all before moving into a sitting position. From there he bent his head so deeply his forehead touched the ground of the bath house.

Igaram gasped and shouted "Your Majesty you shouldn't bow your head like that!"

"That's enough Igaram!" Cobra shouted and the man stiffened. "I thank you, from the bottom of my heart for what you have done for my country as a king. And as a father, I thank you for looking after my daughter."

The Pirates all looked at one another, smiling. "Oi, is that any way for a king to act?" Zoro said with a bit of a smirk on his face. In his view it took a real amount of courage for someone like a king to realize he needed to thank someone like this, let alone going through with it.

"It is when he owes someone as much as I owe you." Cobra said, his head still pressing into the cold tiles of the bathhouse.

To one side Sanji sat up too, smiling at his fellow pervert. Chopper too

smiled happily. “Heheh, don’t worry about it, helping nakama is what real pirates are supposed to do.”

Luffy laughed. “Oh get up your majesty, Chopper’s right. We didn’t do it for thanks but for Vivi, well, most of us did anyway. And besides, you should wait until you see the wreckage that was your library before really thanking us.”

Since the King had been speaking loud enough for them all to hear even over the sound of the running water his speech along with Luffy and Zoro’s reply had been overheard by the girls on the other side and Robin added in her own two cents at this point. When she spoke her voice was its habitual calm tone with nothing hinting in it of her despair she had felt when the Poneglyph here proved to be a dead end, carried to the other side by a mouth high up in the intervening wall so she didn’t have to shout. “Indeed, you should wait until next morning for that. I haven’t been able to take my own lump of flesh just yet.”

The King laughed and resumed bathing, moving into the water with Igaram and eyelashes beside him.

Nami however was looking at Robin thoughtfully. She sidled up to Robin with one arm looped around Vivi’s pulling her along through the water. Vivi was looking at her quizzically, but not fighting her as she moved over to sit beside Robin. “So, that power of yours? I don’t suppose you’d be willing to... pay the men back in like coin would you? It’s only fair after all.”

Vivi’s eyes widened, and a blush suffused her face. But to the watching Makino’s amused surprise she didn’t back away, staring at Robin with the remnants of her liquid given courage.

In response Robin allowed her lips to quirk into a smile. “I could, but I couldn’t share what I am seeing with you. Not physically anyway.”

Nami waved a hand while Makino rolled her eyes and made no move to join them. All of the boys and the crew were too young for her, and she had no interest in either of the other two men over there.

“You could describe them, and I bet you could do it very well too, given how many books you read.”

“I won’t be that invasive. I will however admit that the idea of paying them back in like coin is enticing.” With that Robin closed her eyes crossing her hands as she summoned up an eyeball up in the ceiling, and then several more eyeballs on the men’s side of the bath. “Hhmmm, that’s interesting. Sanji is actually quite a bit more built in the upper body area than I would’ve expected.”

“It comes from all those handstands he does in his personal style I think,”

Nami said with a smile. "Now come on, more information Robin-neesama!"

Rolling her eyes at the younger girl's wheedling tone, Robin complied, now giving a running commentary. "Sanji is a little too colorless. I think he needs more sun since he's always wearing those suits and long sleeved shirts. His hair also is in that same coif despite being wet. He has a very decent build, the build of an all-around sprinter and fighter rather than a bodybuilder. I would give Sanji 7 out of 10. He has a very well defined six-pack, but is a little hairy for my preferences, as in, he has hair on his chest in the first place."

During this description Nami and Vivi began to giggle and Robin smiled at them, now getting into it herself and enjoying the moment of female camaraderie. Makino rolled her eyes but made no move to leave, simply enjoying the show.

"Moving on, Zoro is the most physically powerful looking upper-body wise of the men over there, despite not being as wide across the shoulders as Igaram... who I will not mention again, ugh. Zoro has an extremely well-defined set of pecs and a six-pack like Sanji, but his chest is heavily marred by a rather nasty scar that he has crossing from one shoulder down to the opposite hip. I'm certain there has to be some tale behind that, but wherever it came from it is a very nasty wound."

Robin paused at that, not having seen Zoro shirtless before this. Shaking off her curiosity she continued. "He has other scars as well, which mar his form somewhat to my eyes. Not enough to make him unhandsome though if you're into the bodybuilder type, which again is not my type for preference. Still, objectively I would give him an 8 out of 10."

"And the captain?" Nami asked, leaning forward eagerly, invading Robin's personal space a little though Robin didn't respond, even when the other girl's breasts pressed into her side. She likewise didn't do anything when Vivi leaned in, a blush making her face look like a tomato but unable to turn away.

Instead Robin's mind was focused on the image of Luffy standing up in the water, his towel on the ground next to the bath. "9," she breathed.

Nami blinked, confusion and other emotions welling up inside her. Really? You'd give Luffy 9 out of 10?"

Robin replied before she could stop herself. "No I think that's an accurate description of a certain part of him rather than captain-san's score on the scale."

Groaning Makino covered her ears having no desire to hear this about the young boy/girl that she had helped raise. The two younger girls however took a while to get it. When they did Vivi simply blushed, staring straight ahead as steam came out of her ears, while Nami flushed a bright red, licking her lips subconsciously.

Shaking her head at that, Robin continued to watch as Luffy turned picking up his towel, unconsciously putting on display the most delicious male rear that Robin had seen in her entire life. Then she gasped, as Luffy turned, flashing a handful of water up at her eyes, causing Robin to pull out of the form.

"Two wrongs don't make a right you know!" Luffy shouted, but did not answer any of the other boys questions as they turned to him quizzically.

"What part of 'pirate' was vague?" Robin replied equally loudly, before shaking her head at the younger girls to either side of her. "Funs over girls, he spotted my main eye" she went on gently pushing Nami away with a hand on her stomach.

Sighing, Vivi reached for a bottle of wine, pouring some more drinks for them all in an effort to calm herself down. "Erm, yes, well, that's a pity. So, what is the story behind Zoro's giant wound? I take it that was something he received before I joined the crew?"

Nami smiled widely at Vivi's word choice there. It gave her hope that her friend would be coming with them when they left Alabasta. To help that along she began to give a rundown of the adventures that the crew had in East Blue before reaching the Grand Line. The only one Vivi had heard about before this was the crew's saving Nami from Arlong, so it made for some interesting listening to both Vivi and Robin.

Later, they joined the men outside where Robin studiously did not meet Luffy's eyes, though he seemed more amused rather than irritated at her actions. She had no way of knowing, of course, that Luffy really didn't have much body consciousness. That came from having been spied on so often as Ranma and so much time spent on a marine ship, where privacy was a premium. Yes he preferred to be private, but after watching the Sanji and the others try to perv on the girls, he wasn't about to turn around and say the girls couldn't do the same thing to them.

Nami was still laughing at both their reactions and one confusing thing about the whole event. "What I don't understand is why you joined the voyeurs Chopper," she said, looking down at the little creature as it walked between her and Vivi. "You said at one point that human girls didn't do anything for you so why did you peep?"

"I'm sorry I fall quickly to peer pressure!" Choppers shouted, hiding his face in his hands. The other boys laughed, while Sanji swooned around Nami, thanking her for the gift and promising that he would actually get her money to her as soon as they divvied up the loot, whenever that occurred.

That actually made Nami feel a little wrong about the whole thing,

remembering Makino and Robin's words from earlier. But she resolutely did not look in Robin or Makino's direction, simply smiling and nodding "yes Sanji-kun, that will do nicely. Just don't think I'll make a habit of charging you cash for the view. The next time you perv on us, I'm going to force you to walk the plank."

"Of course Nami-chwan, I would never impose on you in such a manner!" Sanji replied still dancing around her.

"My question is about the camel," Luffy interjected with a laugh. "I mean it wouldn't be too far-fetched for Chopper to be interested both as a doctor and as a guy simply because he ate the human-human fruit, but what the heck does a camel see in a girl?"

"Their humps?" Makino asked innocently and all of them groaned or booed at the pun.

"I still can't believe you didn't join in," Nami said with a grin at both Zoro and Luffy. "You I can understand, Zoro, you've got that girlfriend in the Marines or you're in love with your swords, one of the two. But you Luffy, is there something you want to tell us? Or should I just assume that your female body isn't as much trouble as you would like us to think?" she teased.

Ignoring Zoro's snarl of outrage Luffy cocked an eyebrow, then allowed his eyes to trail down Nami's body and back up before looking over at Vivi doing the same thing to her and then to Robin. "Did you really want me to?"

While Vivi was reduced to a stuttering mess Nami blushed hotly, affected more from that, for some reason, than the earlier looks the boys had given her when she had flashed them. For her part however Robin merely chuckled, her eyes capturing Luffy's winking at him while placing her hands on her cocked hips. That seemed to take Luffy aback a little, but he looked back at her evenly.

In the background Makino chuckled, while Sanji glared. *Just because he doesn't flirt often or care much about relationships doesn't mean that Luffy doesn't know the ropes so to speak.*

The crew of young people continued to talk and laugh as they entered the series of rooms that the Straw Hats had been given. This included two rooms, one for Sanji, Zoro and Chopper, and one for the girls along with a smaller room that Luffy had claimed for himself. "Captain's privilege," He'd said at the time, even if it wasn't the largest room in the suite. It did however have a balcony like the other three which was important to Luffy.

For a few moments they simply lounged around in the main sitting area, still talking. Then Vivi, who had used this time to gather her courage as she asked in a

slow, soft voice, "Hey, everyone, what should I do?"

None of the Straw Hats had to ask what she meant. Nami and Chopper grinned at her, reaching over and taking her hands. "Come with us!" they said as one, then grinned at one another.

Sanji smiled, and joined in. Zoro simply nodded, while Robin and Makino did the same. But it was Luffy who Vivi watched, and he said nothing, simply smiling at her. "You'd be welcome to join us Vivi, he said simply and she smiled brightly.

"Just make sure," he went on, "that it's a choice you can live with. We're going to leave about two hours before sunrise, so you have until then to make your decision. We need time to get to the Revenge and meet up with this, heh, Too-gay guy."

Later after most of them had gone to bed Luffy sat out on the balcony, going back to his meditations about the fight which had been interrupted by the goings-on in the bath. This time however he wasn't analyzing his own fight with Crocodile, but how he had acted as captain. There, Luffy thought that he had done reasonably well in splitting the crew as he had, indeed going by what Chopper and Makino had said, his sending them with Vivi had saved her from being kidnapped at the very least. Zoro and the team of Sanji and Robin had seemed to work out as well, though not without danger. *Should have remembered the Mushis damn it, that's a mistake I won't make again.*

The problem was, Luffy should have sent Nami with Sanji and Robin instead of forcing her to fight. That just wasn't her, and it had put Nami in real danger since Luffy had also made a mistake in how the BW pairs acted. He had thought if Crocodile had kept Mr. 1 there, which he had, he and his partner would work together, and Zoro and Nami would have fought them as a team.

But they hadn't and since Nami had left Zoro behind, she had been alone when Doublefinger had found her. If not for Zoro's girlfriend (even in his mind, Luffy had to hold back a snicker at that) Nami might well have been overwhelmed. *I can't shelter Nami from combat all the time, but that doesn't mean I should try and force her to be something she isn't. Fighting will never be her first choice, and her style needs to reflect that.*

With that in mind, Luffy decided to overhaul Nami's training. *More dodging ability for certain and Makino can try and teach her how to use pistols and other long-range weapons that and some Soru could make her able to keep away from any attacker, and also able to help Makino snipe. Maybe some Aikido too, a purely defensive style might work very well if she can also eventually learn Observation Haki.*

She also needs a proper weapon of some kind, but she isn't a swordswoman, and her staff is just not cutting it. Something tricky, but what? I might be good at martial arts construction, but beyond a certain point that doesn't really help me making a weapon.

Luffy turned away from the view up as the door to his suite opened and Vivi tiptoed in silently. "Is something wrong Vivi?" He asked, moving and holding up the silk blinds for her so she could join him out on the balcony.

"Nothing's wrong," responded Vivi, her face slightly flushed both from emotion and possibly from drink still. "Or yes something is wrong, but nothing physically." She hesitated. "I'm still, still thinking about what I asked earlier." She moved over to him, looking up at him from barely a few inches away. "What do you think I should do?"

Luffy cocked his head to one side staring down at her, then moved backwards taking her hand in his and pulling her gently until the two of them stood leaning against the balcony's railing, while above them the moon shone brightly. From here, Vivi could look out over the capital city, and into the desert beyond. She took a moment to do just that while Luffy watched her from one side.

"Why did you fight against Crocodile?" he asked softly. "What is your treasure, your dream? You sacrificed two years of your life investigating Baroque Works and could've thrown your own life away into the bargain. Why?"

"Because I love my country," Vivi said simply turning back to smile brightly at him, before her face fell slightly. "And that's just it. Before all this, I would've said my treasure was my country, my dream to see it at peace once more. But now that it's accomplished, I, I'm filled with a desire to see what's beyond the next horizon, like I told Nami-san earlier. I want to see what adventures are out there waiting for you! I want to go with you! I've never felt this, this at home before. I am closer with you and the others than I have been to anyone else, even Kohza and the others. I love my father, I love my country, but I still want to go with you."

Luffy nodded, looking at Vivi thoughtfully. "I suppose the question is when you close your eyes do you see yourself as Vivi the pirate? Would you be willing to leave this all behind, to never come home again. Because that is what it would take. You would have to throw away your past entirely or you'd bring more trouble to your nation in the future. Do you see yourself as a pirate, a member of the Pirate King's crew, or a princess?"

Vivi looked away, staring out over the landscape of the capital city for a time. "I wish it could be both," she said softly. "But it can't, can it?"

At Luffy simple shake of his head, Vivi sighed. "Then I suppose I see Vivi the princess. Which means I'm staying. That, that hurts."

"We'll miss you," Luffy said simply, his voice soft. "Like you said we haven't known each other long, but you became part of our nakama, and we'll all miss you Vivi, never doubt that. And if you ever need help again, don't think for one moment we won't come running," he said allowing a grin to appear on his face. "Just because we're leaving you behind doesn't mean you're no longer nakama."

"That means a lot to me, thank you" Vivi said with a small smile. Then she seemed to hesitate flushing though Luffy could barely make it out in the moonlight. "That," she licked her lips, "that only leaves my, my thanking you."

Luffy frowned. "Your father already thanked us earlier, your country thanked us by, well honestly letting us ransack your library, and provisioning us. And friends don't need to be paid! If this is about Nami's ongoing jokes about you paying us I..."

He was cut off by Vivi moving into his personal space, pressing her chest against his and staring up at him. "No. I want to thank **you**." With that she closed her eyes and leaned up, pressing her lips on his.

Luffy paused, feeling the girl's lips. They were very soft those lips, and though she wasn't nearly as stacked as Nami or the older two women, Vivi was suddenly all girl with enough curves in the right places and a soft feminine smell to her that threatened to invade his senses.

Yet at the same time, Luffy wasn't all he appeared to be on the surface. He might have looked like a seventeen year old, but this was in fact his second time around so to speak. And while Ranma still found Vivi extremely attractive, he was also someone who was highly experienced in always being in control. And because he was, he could still smell the hint of alcohol on Vivi's breath, could feel her trembling, and not totally with desire, against him.

So even as his arms went around her, gently hugging her as she did him Luffy did not deepen the kiss. Vivi pulled back after a moment, her eyes closed, but then she opened them and looked at him quizzically. There was no pain there at his rejection, simply a question. "Why?"

"Not like this," Luffy said simply. "Not for this reason. Like I said, we're friends, and I think you'd regret this down the line."

"I don't think I would!" Vivi answered with a faint embarrassed laugh making no attempt to move away while Luffy continued to hug her.

"And there's this too: I'm not my old man." Vivi cocked her head, but Luffy made no move to elaborate on that point instead saying, "I'm not going to kiss and run."

It's not you, it's me."

That line caused Vivi to laugh, yet she still made no move to back away.

"Would you mind just holding me for a while then?"

Luffy's lips quirked into a wry smile. "Your wish is my command Hime-sama."

That caused Vivi to giggle again, burrowing her head into his chest.

How long the two of them stood there in the moonlight neither knew, but eventually Vivi moved back, and Luffy let her go, not without a twinge of regret it had to be said. The girl was extremely attractive, and Luffy had to admit he found her character attractive too.

"It would have been fun," she said at last, smiling up at him now, a twinkle in her eyes.

"It would have Vivi," Luffy said with a laugh. "And I'm not gonna lie, it would've been my first time too." At that Vivi's smile widened slightly though she made no move to kiss him again and he went on, his voice becoming soft, tender. "But like I said, not if I'm leaving you behind."

Vivi flushed at that, but did not look away from Luffy's gaze until she laughed lightly and leaned up to kiss him on the lips for a brief second. "Thank you for that." She said pulling back and still smiling. "I'll see you tomorrow Luffy."

With that, she disappeared inside, moving through Luffy's room out the door with no one the wiser. Or so she thought. Neither she nor Luffy had noticed Nami had come out on the balcony of the girls' room. There she had hidden herself in the shadow of one of the archways, listening. Nor did either of them see the ear that had appeared on their own balcony hidden in shadow before disappearing in a few flower petals.

OOOOOOO

The next morning before the sun was up Luffy roused his crew as he had promised. With Vivi leading the way they exited the palace, moving through the still silent streets of Alubarna and to the desert below the plateau. There they met the Super Spot Billed Duck Squad that Luffy and the others who had gone to Rain Dinners had met before. Luffy nodded to them all then looked at Vivi, who smiled back. She didn't look like she had been crying, so she had thankfully not taken his rejection badly. He thought she hadn't but it was nice to be certain.

Neither Cobra nor any of the others were there. Luffy thought that was a

pity. He had liked Pell or what he had seen of the flyer anyway and would've liked to say farewell to the man. Still, it was probably better this way.

Something in Vivi's stance seemed to warn Sanji and he sighed dramatically. "Alas, I think our desert princess has decided to stay in her desert, rather than risk life and limb on the oceans with us lowlifes."

Vivi nodded. "I'm sorry, I would dearly love to go with you, but I also love my country. It was for my country that I risked everything I did, and it still needs me."

Robin nodded, moved over and squeezed the girl's shoulder before turning away, looking at Luffy as she passed for a moment. As the others crowded around Vivi, Luffy cocked his eyebrow at Robin and asked in a quiet voice "What?"

"You are much more mature at times than you like to let on," she said simply. Luffy furrowed his brow at that but Robin said no more, simply smiled at him, then moved past heading towards the duck she had used before.

The one Luffy had used before had already sidled up to him while the crying and sobbing was getting over with. Chopper and Nami in particular were quite sad to see Vivi not going with them. Or at least he thought Nami was. Before she reached Vivi there looked to have been a conflicted expression on Nami's face, but it was gone before he could be certain he had seen it in the first place. Now she was sobbing softly into Vivi's shoulder, while the princess held her tightly, with one of her arms while her other was around Chopper's head, who was hugging her leg just as tightly.

Sanji too was moaning, while Zoro simply stood stoically nearby. However, when Nami and Chopper eventually extricated themselves, he moved over and pulled the younger girl into a brief hug before moving away quickly without another word.

Looking at the back of his first mate's head Luffy could almost see his ears blushing. While Makino moved forward to take her own turn hugging Vivi, he nudged Nami who had moved over to him. "What?" she said looking over at him.

Again there was a flash of something in her eyes but he couldn't quite make it out so he ignored it for now. "Look at Zoro's ears," he whispered.

She did and she then giggled, through her sniffles. "Are those red or is it just me?"

"Nope they're red," Luffy said with a laugh. "I think our swordsman is a bit of a tsundere."

Nami laughed aloud, shaking her head and swatting him on the shoulder, her mood improved markedly from a moment before. By then, the others at all finished their farewells, and moved over to Super Spot Billed Duck Squad moving into their backs. Chopper sat with Nami in his small form.

This left Luffy alone for a moment and he stepped forward, pulling Vivi into a hug. He kept it as friendly as possible, both of his arms around her shoulders and squeezing tightly once before moving backwards. "Remember what I said last night?" he said in a low voice before repeating the words louder. "Just because we're leaving you behind, doesn't mean you're not one of our nakama. If you ever need us again, we'll come running." proclaimed Luffy, winking at the girl. "And if you ever change your mind, we'll come running for that too."

"Sanji, Nami, Chopper and even Zoro set up a cheer at that and Luffy went on quietly. "Nami also left you a gift in your room. It should help you eventually to make certain something like Crocodile's rebellion doesn't happen ever again."

Cocking her head quizzically at that, Vivi simply nodded keeping her question to herself for now. She stepped back, wiping at her now somewhat damp eyes. "Thank you! And I'll keep it in mind! Safe travels and I hope you all find everything you're seeking out there!" She said somewhat formally. Then she laughed. "And I hope that you don't drive one another insane as you do it!"

The crew all laughed, while Makino nodded her head, indicating that she thought that was actually quite a good point. With that Luffy pulled himself up into the saddle of his duck, and they sped away without another word.

Vivi stood there for a moment watching them go, her eyes lingering on Nami and Luffy in particular, before she turned back, pulling herself into Carue's saddle. "Come on my friend, we have a lot to do today!"

Truer words were never spoken as the moment she got back to the palace Vivi threw herself into the ongoing work to heal the rift between the rebels and the Royal factions setting up numerous meetings with Kohza and his officers on neutral ground. She also sent several royal auditors to work on their own books and to Rain Dinners to inspect Crocodile's old casino.

While she was doing that, Igaram was leading Chaka, Pell, and several of their trusted officers on busily rooting out any remaining Baroque Works agents. Even with the organization shut down, anyone who had a Baroque's Works mark on them had proven themselves untrustworthy to remain in the guard. Her father Cobra was also busy in long-distance communications with the World Government.

The two of them were able to enjoy a late lunch together however. Cobra had just told her about the World Government sending special investigators to help figure out how Crocodile had funded everything, as well as the true depth of Crocodile's betrayal of his status as Shichibukai when the captain of the guard burst in, carrying several papers.

For a moment he seemed to sag in relief at seeing Vivi there shaking his head violently to rid it of some horrible thoughts. Before either Royal could ask him what he was relieved about he moved forward to slam the stack of papers down on the table between them. "Hime-sama, Your Majesty, you should look at this."

Igaram spread the papers out so that each of them was visible from both Cobra and Vivi's place, causing Cobra to gasp in shock, and Chaka and Pell to move from their positions nearby where they had been guarding their King even here to look over their shoulders. Vivi however simply laughed aloud shaking her head. "Oh my, they'll be happy about that I think. Except for perhaps Mr. Bushido and Nami-san. Mr. Bushido is only barely ahead of chef-san now and as for Nami-san..."

On the table were new bounty posters for the three main combatants of the Straw Hat crew as well as Nami. However like Sanji's picture, Nami's was a drawing and it was not very flattering at all. Yes, her curves were shown if in a cartoonish fashion but her face was squashed, almost like it was made out of marshmallow or something, with fat cheeks while her face wore a sneer that to Vivi's certain knowledge Nami had never worn. She also didn't actually have a name, the title of the bounty poster read 'unknown female Straw Hat Pirates'. Her bounty was 10,000, rather a small amount for any Grand Line bounty.

"'Unknown female?'" Vivi mused with a giggle. "I don't know if Nami-san will be happy about that, or utterly horrified at the picture."

"I personally am just happy that you weren't given a bounty," Cobra said, putting an arm around his daughter's shoulder as both of his guards nodded their heads solemnly.

"How can you take this so calmly?! Look at the bounty amounts!" Igaram shouted.

Sanji's bounty was now 80,000,000 Beli. Something odd about his poster caught Vivi's attention though: it said 'wanted alive' rather than 'wanted dead or alive'. That was odd, but not nearly as odd as the actual pictures still being used for Sanji in Vivi's opinion.

In contrast, Zoro's hadn't actually gone up that much, only being 85,000,000 now. The words and picture hadn't changed either. Vivi took a moment to wonder about the rivalry between the chef and the swordsman and what this would do to it. *Nothing good for certain, unless you're watching from the sidelines anyway*, she decided with a wholly inappropriate giggle.

However, by far and away the biggest change had been reserved for Straw Hat Luffy. His picture hadn't changed either, about his amount had nearly tripled.

"130,000,000 Beli, such a massive amount," Vivi mused. "Is that because he was able to beat Crocodile or because he killed him?"

"Hard to say, but it's certain that worried the Marines. The World Government is also very worried about it, though talking to their representatives I think they're worried about something else entirely on top of that which they weren't willing to share with me," Cobra mused. "Still, Igaram is right. With bounties like this, they're going to run into serious opposition, Commodores and above at a minimum. Do you think they'll be able to handle that level of conflict?"

"I think that the crew can handle it," Vivi said, more calmly than Cobra would've assumed. "In fact, at least three of them are going to enjoy the challenge." She chuckled and after that quickly finished her meal, going back to her room to change her clothing for an on-site interview.

She'd have to take Carue to it, or perhaps Pell, she thought to herself as she entered the room. Considering that it was going to be with former rebels Vivi decided to use Carue. She'd be a little late, but arriving with a Royal guardsmen, especially one with Pell's reputation, would send a negative message that she didn't want to convey just yet.

As Vivi was rummaging through her clothing to decide what to wear and waiting for her maid to arrive to help her, Vivi suddenly remembered what Luffy had told her that morning. Looking around, she tried to think of where Nami would have put a present for her where others wouldn't be able to notice it. It was only when she looked under the bed that she found it, stuff between two of the bars holding up the mattress. It was a small chest about as long as her forearm.

When she opened it, Vivi found it contained a large fruit of some kind. Its shape was like a jujube, but its outer skin had odd whirls on it that she had never seen before. Vivi stared at it for a moment then realization dawned as she very gently pulled it out, her eyes continuing to widen as she looked at it. *Oh my God*, she thought to herself, looking around to make certain that she was alone, before tucking it back in to the chest and hiding it away once more. *A kingly gift indeed, but one which will bring a lot of attention I can't afford just yet.* She'd have to think about what to do with the Suna-Suna Fruit later. Right now, she had other things to do.

OOOOOOO

Luffy and the rest of his crew were not well pleased to find that the Resolve had been joined by another ship. On it were around fifty people and yes, as they had

been warned, all of them dressed in ballerina tutus. This included Mr. 2, who was standing on the prow of the Resolve, waving theatrically at them.

"Hello, hello dear compatriots! Fellow pirates like we need to stick together of course if we are to get out of these dire straits! He even had the nerve to wink at Makino. "I am glad to see that you are alright my dear, hopefully your captain has agreed to our deal, and ara who is that little cutie-chan~~?"

As Chopper leaped to hide behind Nami (getting it right this time) Luffy growled, shaking in anger and disgust. "One, never say that again. Two, stay away from me, if you come within range you're going to be singing soprano. Three, she's not my lady friend as your tone seems to imply, if anything she's sort of my big sister."

"Big sister, little sister, it tends to vary with circumstances," Makino murmured. She looked at Mr. 2 closely. While this wasn't the first time she had seen his actual face, he definitely did not look as if he healed up from their fight as she had thought he would. That was interesting, and it also meant that he probably didn't have a doctor on board.

"And fourth and most importantly, get... off... my... ship!" Luffy growled, his eyes narrowing as he bared his teeth at the other man. "There's a word for people who board a ship without permission."

Mr. 2 laughed, then hopped over the side of the ship to land on the ground. Before he could say anything however Sanji got into Mr. 2's face. "I realize we're supposed to be working together and two crews are better than one, but you did try to kill or kidnap Vivi-chan, and fought Makino-chwan! What price do you think I would be taking out of your hide right now if you'd hurt her precious face ehrrrr!? What shitty nether regions of hell do you think you'd visit for that transgression, **EHHHHH!**?"

"Enough of that Sanji!" Nami said, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him away. Ignoring the fact that his visible eye had turned into a heart at her touch, she turned to Mr. 2. "You have a plan?"

"I'd say he does," Zoro said, looking at the super-spy's crew. Despite being dressed up like ballerinas, all of them were hard at work trying to make their ship look like the Resolve. Since they were both schooners, this wasn't an impossible task and Zoro had immediately understood why he was doing so. "Interesting idea."

Luffy saw this and sighed. "I might as well pitch in. But first, Chopper, can you find Banchi?"

Nodding Chopper moved over to the edge of the river, transforming to his monster form as he did. In that form he was able to stick his upper body into the water, shouting out for Banchi. An instant later the large turtle in question arose out

of the riverbed. He stuck his long neck out over the side of the river. It made some hisses and noises, looking expectantly at Sanji who smiled moving over to it and holding out a cigarette and a lighter. “What else did he say there Chopper?”

Chopper quickly transformed back to his normal form, shifting his face around so he looked like a heavily-jowled older man. “Oh ho, so you lot are still alive? Interesting. And I’d guess you want your money brought up? I moved it all away from where you sank it when this lot showed up just in case.”

“Ahh, Banchi thank you!!” Nami said, racing forward and throwing her arms around the told turtle’s neck in a hug. Unlike with Eyelashes Banchi didn’t seem to be a pervert thankfully, taking this sign of affection stoically. An instant later, Nami turned glaring at the boys. “Well, what are you lot waiting for, get our treasure out of that river!”

“Hai Nami-chwan!” Sanji shouted obediently, stripping off his shoes and outer jacket. Zoro however just crumbled and moved off to examine Mr. 2’s ship.

Laughing Luffy threw the girl a mock salute, amused as always by how important gold and money were to the orange-haired girl. Still, given how all of the money she had earned through her thievery before this had gone to paying off Arlong, and then been left behind for her fellow villagers, he could understand. *So long as she doesn’t try to seriously take control of the ship’s purse in the future. I have plans for that cash, and any more we can acquire along the way.*

Luffy moved to the river, and after making certain that his shirt wouldn’t become see-through dove into the water. The redhead and Sanji moved down into the river following the silhouette of Banchi as he moved around. the silt in the river made visibility near impossible, but they were still able to follow the large turtle’s movements.

It took them a few minutes to find the treasure chests and bags of gold, by which time Sanji had to surface for air. Nami and Robin hurled several ropes down from the deck of the Resolve as Mr. 2 and Zoro and Makino talked about their plans going forward.

At the same time Chopper said goodbye to the ducks, giving one of them a Den-Den Mushi to give to Vivi from the ship’s supply. With it, she would be able to talk to them regardless of distance, and they wouldn’t need to assign her a frequency, since the Mushi in question was already paired with the crew’s. However, that didn’t mean they couldn’t be overheard, so it could only be used in emergencies.

With Luffy tying the ropes to the chests the girls were able to haul the treasure chests up to the surface and then onto the ship. The bags containing jewels

and gold jangled as they came, and soon Mr. 2's oddly dressed crew stopped their work to stare at the gold coming up. But with the threat of the marine cordon to break, the normal piratical response to such treasure was in abeyance and a barked command from their captain sent them back to work.

Soon the job was done, and Luffy exploded out of the water, gasping in air before making for the bank. As the redhead came ashore, Mr. 2 noticed her and cocked his head. "Ara, I didn't see redhead-chan there before~, where did she come from?"

Zoro shrugged unconcerned. "Oh, that's just our captain, he's got this weird curse, apparently got it from someone he met as a baby."

"We'd prefer you and your crew never mention it or better yet forget you saw the curse. We use his female form occasionally to turn in bounties." Makino interjected. "It was some kind of Devil Fruit power he was exposed to as a baby, but we've turned it to our advantage."

A normal pirate captain would have objected to that. While it wasn't exactly against the unwritten code most pirates followed, turning in live bounties was something that only a few Shichibukai would do. After all, a death in battle was to be preferred than either a life in prison or death by execution.

But Mr. 2 wasn't any pirate. No, he was not just a pirate at all, but an **okama** pirate, one who had set out to sea to find a single person, a person who was known to have that power. "He, she, your captain, don't even joke~~!" Mr. 2 roared, leaping with a twirl to land in front of Luffy as she pulled herself out of the water. "You, you have such an amazing body~~, can you tell me anything about the man who gifted you with it?"

"Gifted me with it'?" Luffy asked incredulously. "This body isn't a gift, it is a curse! And why the hell do you want to know?"

"I have been searching for the king of the Okama Kingdom, Lord Ivankov for years that was what first brought me into contact with Crocodile in the first place!" Your curse, I don't know why it's connected to water, but it sounds like something the Hormone-Hormone fruit could do~~." Mr. 2 said.

"Yes, the longevity of the curse and the fact it activates via application of water is interesting, isn't it?" Robin mused aloud, one eyebrow twitching upwards as she looked at Luffy and Makino. Makino's expression and body language didn't change but Luffy didn't meet her eyes. It was understandable given he was talking to Mr. 2, but Robin felt there was more to it.

"Why... ya'know what nevermind, I think I can guess." The redhead muttered,

shuddering as he looked at Mr. 2's normal face and male body stuffed into a ballerina's outfit complete with swan costume, pushing the man away as he tried to get into her personal space. "And what did I tell ya about coming near me!?"

When he noticed the redhead's foot rising as if to kick out Mr. 2 backed away and Luffy went on. "As for your question, I have no idea where Ivankov is. I only know his name because my Ji-kure told me about it. He might have been captured by him, that could be where I was exposed to his power." Luffy said with a shrug.

He had no reason to tell Mr. 2 about Ivankov being a member of the Revolutionary Army, and no wish for his connection to Dragon to come out. Unlike his relation to Garp, no one but Garp seemed to have made the connection between him and Dragon, and he wanted to keep it that way. Even on his crew, the only one who knew was Zoro, and Luffy knew the secret was safe with his first mate.

"Ji-kure?" Mr. 2 asked.

"Monkey D. Garp." Makino supplied before Luffy could, holding out a hot cup of water towards the redhead. "And again we'd prefer if that connection didn't become common knowledge."

Mr. 2 exclaimed in shock at that, while his crew jabbered a little in fear in the background at the mention of the hero of the marines, the one who had continually hounded even the Pirate King himself. This let Luffy dump the hot water over his head, then look over at Robin and Banchi. "So, is Banchi going to come with us or what?"

Robin shook his head in the negative and Luffy turned to look at Mr. 2's ship. "Nami, Makino and Chopper, get the gold and stuff into the hold and Nami, check your trees to make sure they're alright. Makino after that, take over the crow's nest just in case and Chopper, get the books and stuff stowed. Zoro, Sanji, let's see what Mr. 2 and his crew have been doing."

As they moved off to his ship, Mr. 2 followed, twirling several times. The twirls stopped abruptly as Luffy asked, "So, what's your real name swan-guy? We can't keep calling you Mr. 2, it just sounds shitty."

Sanji nearly choked on his cigarette as he burst out laughing while Zoro chuckled too. Mr. 2 however seemed to quiver in rage, about a second away from launching what would be a very foolish attack on the Straw Hat captain. "GAHHH!! Don't even joke~~!! Do you have any idea how many jokes like that I've heard from my fellow agents! My name is Bon, Bon Clay!"

Making Bon Clay's ship look like the Resolve took them about an hour longer with Ranma and the two other boys, both of whom had learned some Martial Arts

Construction from their captain. That combined with the work that had already been done by Bon's crew allowed them to finish quickly. Now the two ships really did look alike, even their flags, save for a bit of the prow and the number of cannons they both had. After that, Luffy called his crew and Bon together for a planning session.

"The plan is simple enough, but we need to figure out where each of our positions are in this," he began. "Sanji, Nami, Makino and Bon's crew will be on defense. Bon Clay, Chopper, Zoro and I will be on offense. Robin and Bon Clay's crew will man the cannons. Nami will make sure our ships are moving in tandem as fast as possible and Sanji with Makino will protect the ship."

Sanji frowned a little. On one hand he was quite happy to be given orders to defend the ladies, something he would do automatically. But on the other, he had to ask. "Why is Chopper and Number 2 here on offense? Shouldn't we have more on offense than that?"

"No!" Bon Clay said promptly, twitching at the way Sanji had said his former codename. "Remember the plan cook-san~~! He said twirling in place and sending a shiver down Sanji's spine. "We're not trying to fight the Marines, were trying to fight through them~~~! That means we need to keep any offense we launch small and easy to pull back."

Besides," Luffy said with a grin. "I doubt Bonnie boy will be able to kick away the cannonballs like you can."

Bon Clay winced at the very idea and at the jibe at his name and Sanji nodded slowly. "I'll only be able to do it for short amount of time before the bruises start adding up," he warned.

"Hah, if you spent more time training rather than flirting you might actually be useful away from your kitchen, aho- cook" Zoro said shaking his head.

"Enough," Luffy said stepping as Sanji made to lunge forward. "The day's getting on and we need to get going."

"Luffy's right," Nami said from beside her captain, staring up at the sky. "We need to leave within the next few minutes to catch the desert wind, that'll help us make good time downriver. But if we don't go soon we won't be able to use it the whole way."

"I understand your point," Robin said looking at Luffy and addressing the problem at hand. "But I still think we need at least one more person on offense. No offense to Clay-kun, but he isn't worth an entire ship's galley's worth of crewmen."

"That's true," Bon said hesitantly.

"Makino can't use Geppo," Luffy replied. "And Nami's already had her fight

for the next few weeks. Chopper's small enough even Zoro can carry him in the air without it throwing off his Geppo, and he's as good a fighter as Bon is."

That statement, while possibly not true, served its purpose in making the reindeer straighten his spine. He had been looking a little worried about being part of the attacking force, but his captain's confidence in him made him want to prove Luffy right.

Smiling in relief at that statement Nami looked at Robin. "Robin? You think you can do offense and defense?"

Robin frowned then slowly shook her head. "I won't be able to concentrate on both firing the cannons and taking care of any enemy crew members. I could switch from one to another quickly however if need be."

"I can also loan you some of my men to man your ship's cannons." The Okama pirate captain interjected.

"If we could spread them out sure. But could your crew man your cannons along with ours and work the sails with what was left?" Luffy asked skeptically.

"Not as well as we would just our own, but that's the point isn't it Luffy-cha~~n, getting both of our ships away. In fact, on that topic I have another idea. Let my babies show you another specialty of the okama crew!" With that Bon Clay turned away and shouted at his crew. "Babies, show them what you can do!"

With that several of the okama's crew came over from their ship. Each of them was dressed in a way that they sort of looked like one of the Straw Hats. If you squinted or didn't know them anyway. Their attempts to look like women were especially cringeworthy, and Sanji wasn't the only Straw Hat to gag.

Then Bon Clay showed his own contribution. "Hehehe, and I'll be joining in too~~! Watch this." With that he reached out to Nami, tapping her face lightly before she could rear back. Then he touched his own face, and there stood Nami to the light.

Where before the swan ballerina outfit Bon wore had looked disturbing, that changed dramatically on Nami's body, and Sanji's nose began to bleed as Luffy blushed. "Hehehe, you see," Bon said, even his voice sounding slightly like Nami's, if with a horrible accent. "And like Luffy-chan's it's a full body change, look!"

With that Bon opened 'her' front flashing the boys. Luffy, Zoro and Sanji all gasped, blood gushing from their noses for a moment before they all felt hands covering their eyes courtesy of Robin. An instant later they heard a scream of "Stop that!!" and a thump of a skull impacting the deck.

When Robin canceled her powers, the boys saw that Bon had been hammered

into the Resolve's deck, and Nami was standing over her body double with a visible tick on her head and a smoking fist. She looked at them, seemed to consider attacking the boys, then thought better of it as Robin and Makino looked at her.

She did have to smile slightly however at Luffy's reaction, thinking that at least she knew it was self-control rather than lack of interest which led him to not join the other boys in the bathhouse the night before. While she still wasn't certain why that was important to her, Nami knew it was, and that made her happy right now despite the embarrassment of Bon flashing the others with her body.

"Erm, why did that bother you?" Chopper asked hesitantly only to let loose an eep and hide behind Zoro, or rather lean against him, having gotten it wrong this time when Nami glared at him. "I, I mean, you, you flashed us in the baths last night."

"One, I was sort of drunk, two, that was me doing it. I hate the idea of someone else having access to my body like that! And three, because I said so!" Nami growled out. "That's all you need to know."

The other women present nodded. After all, 'because I said so' was a perfectly reasonable reason to them.

After Bon was revived and forced to return to his normal form (much to the horror of Sanji) the discussion ended quickly. The two crews would be spread out onto both ships, to better make certain that they both escaped initially and to make certain that the various disguises that Bon Clay's crew put on worked. Zoro and Chopper would move with Makino to Bon's ship, while he and their lookalikes would join the other Straw Hats on the Resolve.

After that, the two ships quickly set sail down the river's length and out to sea. With the wind behind them coming out of the desert and Nami's having already mapped the river to a fare thee well on their way out, it was easy and much faster than coming up the river had been.

But despite that speed, it wasn't fast enough forward to get from the watchers that Hina had put on every river to get word out to her fleet...

OOOOOOO

"Prepare all ships for the black cage maneuver!" Hina said, pulling on her officers' gloves and striding out from her officer's quarters, where she had been meeting with Smoker and Tashigi. "We have pirates to capture. Hina confused about why there are two ships coming out rather than one, but that will not matter, we will still capture them is that understood!?"

“Hai Captain Hina-sama!” shouted her crew in reply. They immediately began to scramble into action, pushing her flagship out from the port they had been anchored in and sending out orders to the rest of her scattered flotilla. There would be no way she could bring all of her ships into action, but the Black Cage maneuver only needed a minimum of three ships to work. Indeed, given the special ammunition that was an integral part of the plan even a single galleon might have been enough, but Hina wasn’t one to leave a battle to chance.

After making certain her crew was hopping to obey her orders Hina turned back to Smoker. “Are you sure about that you wish to step aside for this? Hina bemused.”

Smoker shook his head. “We might not like it, but the Marines owe them at least a little bit for taking care of Crocodile for us. I want to give them at least a head start.”

The fact that Luffy had him at his mercy not once, but twice, and had not taken advantage of it was something else on Smoker's mind. That rankled up there with stopping Crocodile seemingly for no reason other than the fact they had discovered his intentions towards Alabasta or had perhaps been paid to by the princess. There were hints of some kind of connection there, but Nefeltari Vivi hadn’t been seen in Mugiwara’s company, so if the connection was there, it wasn’t a close one.

The pink-haired marine captain winced at that, understanding what Smoker wasn’t saying. After all Luffy had her at his mercy at one point too, and not only had he not taken advantage of it, he might well have saved her from further injury. “Hina understands. Your help would be useful, but not necessary. Hina will stop them with her tactics and her ships alone.”

“Is that what your sense of justice is worth!?” said a voice from above them, causing both captains to stiffen and turn to see who had spoken. There hopping in the air above them was vice Admiral Doberman hopping in the air via Geppo.

Doberman was heavily scarred, with four X-shaped scars on his face and two on his neck, and some old injury had destroyed the pupil in his left eye. He had a curling mustache and brown hair reaching down to his shoulder. He wore an officer’s coat loose on his shoulders, the stripes of which were in a zig-zag pattern. Underneath he wore a dark purple version of a marine’s dress uniform.

Currently Doberman looked to be sweating, breathing heavily. No matter who you were, hopping between one island and the next via Geppo and Soru was tough as hell.

He settled down on the deck for a moment, snapping an order for a nearby

marine to grab him a bottle of water and some food before glaring hard at Smoker.

"Is that what your dedication to justice is worth!? You would put your personal idea of what is right and wrong over that of your superior officers in order to pay off a debt you think we owe this rookie pirate? You would presume to speak for the Marines?"

"Sir," Smoker said biting off the word "I merely think that we should wait for a few hours, let them have a head start as payment for doing our dirty work. That's all I said Sir."

"That is enough to make you sound like a traitor!" Doberman roared, getting in Smoker's face. "We must nip this new evil in the bud before it can grow further! You will join with Captain Hina and myself in doing this, or I will label you as a traitor and execute myself right here."

Smoker grimaced, but stepped back and saluted quickly. "Very well Sir, my ship and I will join the battle."

"Good." With that settled Doberman turned to Hina, his eyes moving up and down her body in a very subtle way that she still caught before he addressed her. "And you, your ship will be my new flagship for this maneuver. Your fleet is already in the process of moving?"

"Yes sir," Hina said, crisply coming to a salute trying to ignore the bubbling sense of rage going through her. "We will be using the Black Cage maneuver. We slow the pirate vessels at long range, then close and board them. I have never allowed anyone to escape me once they are within my cage."

"Very good," Doberman said with a smile. "With that, myself, your and Smoker's abilities, there is no way this upstart pirate crew will be to get away. I will personally take on their captain, and bring this evil to justice."

As he turned to stride off towards the tiller, Smoker and Hina took a moment to look at one another, then looked over at Tashigi who finally relaxed after having sprung to attention when Doberman appeared, feeling very uncomfortable about being around a Vice-Admiral, let alone speaking in his presence. "What do you think?" Smoker asked under his breath.

"I think that Doberman is in for a bit of a surprise. We'll see, it will be interesting whatever happens. Hina worried, but interested."

OOOOOOO

About an hour after they had reached the ocean, the two pirate ships found themselves slowly being circled by two Marine schooners, who kept just on the horizon.

Luffy nodded grimly. "They'll keep us in sight until they can call up the big boys, then come in from every side. We can't stop, not unless we want to fight the entire force."

Zoro was standing beside him for now, putting off the time he'd have to transfer to Bon's ship to join Chopper, but knowing that time was here now. "Could we, you think?" His voice wasn't quite questioning, simply curious as to where his captain would rate their chances in that large a fight.

"Probably Zoro," Luffy replied. "We'd end up killing most of them though, and while I have a major problem with the World Government and a lot of the higher ups, most of the Marine grunts are just doing what they're told thinking they really are fighting the good fight. And in a lot of ways they are, remember that not all pirates act like we do, hell not even most."

"I won't hesitate to kill them if I have to or if they're obeying particularly horrible orders, but not in a situation like this." He laughed suddenly. "Besides, isn't it a pirate's lot in life to be chased?"

"What about your Haoshoku?"

"No way!" Luffy said promptly, shaking his head emphatically. "You think that taking out Crocodile painted a big target on our back? If the World Government finds out I have Haoshoku they'll start sending admirals after us. People who are tougher than any Shichibukai."

"I see," Zoro said, frowning. "You sure about that?"

"The best we could hope for in that situation is they send Ji-kure after us. I'm not certain which one of us would win that fight Zoro," Luffy said. "But I know for a fact that we wouldn't have a ship afterwards."

I suppose I could break out the rising Dragon technique, yeah...this might be the perfect moment for it... Luffy smiled suddenly, causing Zoro to cock an eyebrow at him but his captain waved him off. "Just thought of something I can use if we get encircled. I don't think the ship would be very happy with me afterwards, and I'd probably break Nami's mind a little, but it would be fun to see the effect on the Marines if I tried it."

"Something tells me I don't want to know," Zoro said with a shark line grin. "And only half because it would spoil the surprise."

The two men laughed, then Zoro left, hopping out over the water to the other pirate vessel. A moment later, Makino, who was on look out on said ship shouted down at the same time her look alike on the Resolve did the same. "I see three galleons ahead of us sailing in formation ahead of us. They're spreading out to bring us to action wherever we turn."

“Nami?” Luffy asked, smiling confidently over at his navigator.

Said navigator flushed in pride at the look in her captain’s eyes for a moment before glancing up at the sky. A second later she dropped a rope over the side, and after deliberating nodded her head sharply. “The current’s going to turn to the east of our current heading in about ten minutes, after that the wind driving us from Alabasta will die but it will be quickly replaced by one pushing us southeast from our current heading. If we can take advantage of that, we can ride it at least three times the speed we’re going now.”

Seeing Luffy nod, Nami began to operate the tiller as Luffy shouted out their plan to Bon, who relayed the orders to his ship via the Den-Den Mushi set the Straw Hats had bought in Logue Town. The two pirate ships began to turn under Nami’s shouted commands, while the schooners from behind slowly began to sail ever nearer. At the same time the galleons became visible even from the deck of the two ships.

The galleons in question were massive ships of war, easily half again the keel size of a schooner, with a far wider body to boot. Where the Resolve had originally had twenty-two guns to a side, these behemoths had that number of guns per gun deck, of which they had three to a side. The three ships spread out, trying to make certain both to get in the two pirate ship’s way and make certain they couldn’t make a sudden dash to the west of their current course.

About ten minutes later, Nami’s awaited wind change hit, and the two pirate schooners began to pick up speed. This put one of the galleons, the western most, out of position entirely to engage them, falling away and unable to tack into the wind. This left the two pirate ships facing two schooners coming up with the same wind behind them as was no pushing the pirates along, and the two galleons still able to range on them if they kept to their current course. Unfortunately since the galleons had started outside of the pirate ships breaking out from Alabasta, there was no way to fully break away.

About an hour later the first galleon and the Resolve entered cannon range. The forward guns along their starboard sides opened fire, the marines firing first since they not only had more guns but more ammunition to spare. The nature of that ammunition however took the pirates by surprise. Instead of firing cannonballs the guns of the galleon shot out long spears of heavy metal. They looked like ballista bolts of some kind, and Luffy wondered why they were being used rather than regular cannon rounds.

“Now these I can kick away a lot more easily than cannons!” Sanji shouted with glee. Cigarette still in his mouth Sanji leaped up from the Resolve, smashing

two of them away with a spinning kick that smacked one into the second.

At the same time, Luffy and Zoro went to work blocking the others, Zoro having moved over to join Chopper on Bon's ship. "Robin, oh and you fruitcakes too, fire!" Luffy shouted at the top of his lungs while smashing several of the ballista bolts away.

At Luffy's command both pirate schooners opened fire with their broadsides. Bon's crew followed a second later and while they weren't very accurate, their ship actually had more guns than the Resolve. Their first few shots went wild the next few began to hammer at the schooners trying to catch up from behind, trading cannon balls with the strange spear things, which, thanks to Zoro and Chopper, never actually hit.

But unlike the trailing ship, the Resolve's target was one of the galleons, specifically the one coming in from the west. A schooner should never have been able to trade blows with a galleon, but thanks to Luffy blocking their ballistae-like ammunition from actually hitting, the schooner was actually the first to draw real blood. That wouldn't last however, as those three galleons were spreading out once more. There was a crash, and one of the galleon's gun-ports, almost exploded with splinters as a lucky cannonball entered it, taking out the gun inside, smashing it off its runners and sending its crew flying.

"Hey Zoro!" Luffy began, negligently smacking aside one of the metal spears while hopping in midair, then grabbing another out of the air before using it as a giant weed whacker to smack several more. "How's your long-range attack these days?"

"Fair," Zoro replied, also shouting to be heard over the intervening distance and the sound of battle. "Not where I want it to be just yet, it loses a lot of its slicing power the further away the blast goes, but I can at least cut metal now. And I've come up with three different levels for the same technique." He demonstrated this as he was talking, using the same long range slashing attack that had taken out Mr. 1 to slice several incoming spears into pieces, blowing the parts back out into several more knocking them off course.

"Good." Luffy said, then aimed using the spear he was using as a makeshift weapon toward the lead galleon, the one that even now was turning to bring its starboard broadside to bear in a classic 'crossing the T' maneuver. "Aim for the water line," Luffy ordered, then hurled the spear forward with all his considerable strength, before following it up with several dozen Rankyakus.

Zoro grinned, then taken Wado Ichimonji's hilt into his mouth. Tensing he leaped into the air and aimed forward at the galleon, shouting, "Hyakuhachi Pondo Hō!

(108 pound cannon!)”

Luffy's attacks hit first, the spear smashing into the wood of the ship right at the waterline. It plunged into the wood with only slightly less force than a cannon could have imparted, smashing deep into the wooden hull and sending splinters flying inside. Then his Rankyaku hit, slicing into the wood in multiple sections, letting water start to flow in. Then Zoro's attack arrived, slicing into, widening the wounds the ship had sustained into a series of long gashes where water flooded in far faster than before.

The galleon immediately began to list as it took on water, wallowing now and no longer able to make any headway. It still fired at them, but now as Luffy ordered Nami to break further east, they began to move out of its cannon range on an angle to bring them around the ship's aft.

In response however the ship trying to attack them from the side switched tactics. Instead of staying at range it began to close, charging straight on in an effort to board one of the two pirate ships. It also switched out from firing the spears to regular cannon balls.

“That's one my babies~~!” Bon said from his position on the Straw Hat's shouting the words in order to encourage his crew both aboard the Resolve and his own ship via the Den-Den Mushi. “But we still need to take out this last galleon. Then we're free!”

“Luffy!” Makino interrupted the other pirate captain, her voice nearly unheard over the battle, the wind and waves. “We have at least two more galleons out there trying to cut us off from the open sea.”

“Keep firing at the schooners!” Luffy ordered, looking over at Robin, who was sitting under the mainmast, her arms crossed and her eyes closed. Despite concentrating on the literally thousands of arms and feet she had conjured to work the guns on both ships with the Okama pirates she was still able to nod at him before going back to work.

From the Crow's nest of the trailing ship Makino began to fire the first of a dozen rifles she'd taken from Bon's crew. She didn't fire at the incoming spears, she could not imbue haki into bullets after all, though she had heard some people could do so. Instead she shot at the people manning those cannons. Twice she was able to kill a gunner before he could actually fire the cannon.

And once she was able to wing a shot through a gun port into an officer with the match, as he was moving past a inside the ship. After that there was a massive explosion inside the ship and the schooner in question immediately trimmed sails and

broke off sternward.

“Bon, Chopper are you ready?” Luffy said, seeing the two new galleons incoming. The third galleon they had left behind was still trying to catch up, but it’s steersman didn’t seem the best, and it was still losing ground.

“Yes, but you still haven’t told us how we’re getting over there.” Bon said. For his part however Chopper moved away from the railing where he had been guarding the Okama’s with his guard point, transforming to his normal body as he moved to the prow. There Zoro grabbed him up and began to hop towards the target ship.

Luffy grinned. “Clench your teeth!” he ordered and without further warning Luffy twisted his foot impacting Bon’s rear in a roundhouse kick, sending him flying over the water towards the charging galleon.

“Are you sure you weren’t holding a grudge against him for hurting Makino?” Zoro asked as Luffy joined him for a moment in the air.

“Maybe a little,” Luffy said with a laugh before breaking off towards the one remaining schooner. Once in position above the ship he began to rain down Rankyakus onto the crew below, cutting into the rigging and sending several of the men flying overboard. He was very careful however as to how he targeted them. He didn’t want a bloodbath here, just to get away and maybe give the Marines a bloody nose, that was all.

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Unfortunately for Luffy, some complications had just arrived. At the point the last schooner fell back, its rigging ruined and its crew in disarray, the two galleons carrying the three Marine officers had sailed over the horizon. To their horror they saw one of their ships slowly sinking, with one more well out of position. One of the schooners was also falling away, fire trailing from its gun ports. Then they saw at least two, possibly more pirates leap into the air and move towards the remaining schooner and the charging galleon.

“They must not escape!!” Doberman shouted hopping into the air via Geppo. “For Absolute Justice! Circle them and destroy their ships! I will deal with Mugiwara no Luffy myself!”

Smoker nodded, already moving into smoke form and heading out over the waters. “I’ll take the swordsman and the other two.”

“Then that leaves Hina to take on their crews,” Hina said calmly, her eyes

narrowed in fury at how her heretofore unbeatable Black Cage had been broken. "The ships will advance on an angle, we must cut them off before they can leave us behind! Hina determined. Once I leave, Lieutenant Tashigi is to assume command." With that she leaped into the air racing out after her two fellow officers.

On the Smoker's ship Tashigi received the relayed orders via the Den-Den Mushi, and took command of the crew, their galleon now in the lead as they moved to cut across the route the two pirate ships were following. "Man the cannons with a mix of the special munitions and regular rounds." She ordered. "Deck guns to concentrate on the enemy's rigging, the others on their hulls!"

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Luffy was the first to spot the three marines coming towards them through the air, and he frowned looking at the first man, unable to see his rank insignia first. When he did, Luffy bit back a curse, retreating towards The Resolve before moving to engage the man directly. "Zoro! You and the others are on your own. I think Smoker's incoming so you're going to have to deal with him too." Luffy said into his Den-Den Mushi, hoping that all of the combined crews could hear him.

"What!?" Zoro said, pulling his Mushi out of his pocket while absentmindedly dodging a musket ball before sending a slash towards the man who had fired at him. "I can't infuse haki into my weapons yet!"

"Your long-range and air-based attacks should work to keep him at bay at least, just don't get encircled by his smoke," Luffy said crisply, hopping back up into the air. "I'm going to have my own guest in a minute."

Just then there was a brief lull in the fight around him and Zoro looked out to sea on the port side of the galleon he was fighting on where he was able to see the unknown Marine coming towards them, speeding through the air via a mix of Geppo and Soru. He couldn't make out his rank from this angle, but the seriousness that Luffy had just spoken with told him this was a serious threat. "Good luck!"

Luffy moved towards Doberman quickly, hopping in midair directly above him for a moment as Doberman hopped up towards him. "How is that a pirate knows one of the Rokushiki?"

"I'm very damn good at learning from seeing them in action." Luffy replied dryly, seeing no need to educate the man if he wasn't already aware of Luffy's familial connection to Garp.

Doberman's eyes narrowed that then he shouted in a loud voice. "Monkey D.

Luffy, you are hereby under arrest. Come quietly, and you may not be sentenced to death.”

“You really suck at this good cop thing don't you?” Luffy retorted. He pulled off his hat stuffing it into his ki space so fast that even Doberman could barely see what had happened, not that he understood it. “Can I at least have the name of the vice Admiral they were stupid enough to order after me?” Luffy went on, already beginning to use the Saotome ‘Make‘em mad, make ‘em stupid’™ technique.

“Vice-Admiral Doberman. And these are going to be the last word you ever hear pirate scum. For Absolute Justice!!” With that Doberman charged forward, his sword coming out of its scabbard in a sliver of steel. The slash however was a faint and even as Luffy dodged, one of his hands came off his hilt and thrust out, black with haki.

Luffy however blocked it with his own haki infused fist, smacking it to the side and returning a punch that took Doberman in the chest. Again there was a ring of haki against haki, and Doberman grunted, staggering backwards in midair for a moment for you could get control of his air walk. He glared at Luffy then came in again.

Luffy met him, and canceled his own Geppo to better use his legs to attack, and his style seemed to infuriate Doberman. As fast as Doberman was, and he was **fast**, faster even than Crocodile, Luffy was able to use his mastery of the aerial style of Anything Goes to redirect or simply dodge any punch coming towards them.

In return, he was landing hits on Doberman to little effect. Doberman could use haki better than Luffy could at this point, and his arms were constantly black up to his elbows. He couldn't use it on his entire body apparently, but his natural toughness and his Tekkai technique were perfect, smoothly activating and then disengaging when he moved.

For a little while it was a stalemate with Luffy unable to land any telling hits, and Doberman unable to actually hit at all. But Luffy was able to direct Doberman away from the main battle towards the two oncoming galleons, who had just entered cannon range of the pirate ships. As they started to cross the T despite Nami's best efforts to twist away, Luffy's fists suddenly blurred, even to Doberman's senses.

There was the sound of ripping canvas, and Doberman clenched his teeth, his Busoshoku activating in defense mode. But his Geppo wasn't up to keeping him in the air under the hundreds of impacts he had just felt. He crashed into the deck of the trailing ship, grunting in pain from the impact to his unprotected back, but otherwise unharmed. The same could not be said for the ship's main mast, which his

descent had shattered.

Before Doberman could push himself out of the wreckage of the deck, Luffy turned, all four of his limbs flashing out Rankyakus at the foremost galleon. He didn't aim for the ship however, but the ship's masts. All three toppled, and Luffy had a moment to smile before he had to duck aside, his danger sense roaring in his ears.

Doberman had launched three air pressure attacks from his sword, so fast that the attack almost looked as fast as Luffy's Roasting Chestnut technique, but not quite. Despite not seeing them coming, Luffy was able to dodge one, blocked the second, and then had to use Tekkai to take the other two, which still almost knocked him out of the air.

Then Doberman was on him, a Busoshoku enclosed fist smashing into Luffy's jaw and sending him flying down to impact the ship he'd just attacked. Doberman followed him down, attacking and being struck in turn all the while, but it was Doberman who hit the deck first, Ranma's ability to use his opponent's attacks to change his body's momentum still confounding the vice admiral.

When they landed however, Doberman got a blow into Luffy stomach, sending the youth flying into the wall of the captain's quarters. Other marines, including Tashigi charged forward with guns and swords ready, but Doberman ignored them for the most part only shouting out, "Gun crews to remain at stations, fire on their ships! No pirate will escape alive, whatever the cost. For Absolute Justice!"

"For Absolute Justice!" the marines shouted back from below deck, obeying his orders.

At the same time Smoker arrived and without a word his smoke billowed out towards Luffy. He had seen Luffy taking the fight to his ship and Hina's, and had turned back to help Doberman. Despite having no wish to help the Vice-Admiral Smoker couldn't let Luffy attack his crew without him intervening after all.

"Oh, hey Smokey, I'd say good to see ya but I'd be lying." Luffy said, leaping into the air and kicking out at Doberman as he flowed around a slice from Tashigi. One hand caught her arm right behind the elbow and twisted, flipping her end over end into the smoke flowing from Smoker's form. However the smoke parted quickly around her, and began to try and coalesce around Luffy.

Luffy lashed out at the smoke with one hand sending out a small Rankyaku, but he couldn't concentrate on it enough with Doberman pressing him. Realizing this, He leaped into the air, over Doberman, his hands and arms flashing out with hard Rankyaku, hitting and throwing Smoker backwards. This allowed him to hammer Doberman in turn, but he took another hard blow to his chest before he could activate

his Tekkai. And Doberman was so strong that Luffy's normal durability was barely able to stop his Haki infused punch from doing a lot of damage. His return kick sent Doberman stumbling backwards.

At that moment several marines raced forward, trying to pin Luffy down, but he jumped around so easily they couldn't do it. Even Doberman couldn't get a bead on him for his special long range attack. Instead he snarled grabbing his sword up from where it had been stuck in a mast before racing forward, slicing forward, and cutting through a marine to hit Luffy, who grimaced at the blow, and at the act itself. *That was fucking deliberate!*

At the same time Smoker recovered and with a shout of "Mugiwara, this is the end for you!" send disappeared into his smoke form, racing forward. Smoker had not noticed Doberman's act, or he might have attacked him instead, but he hadn't and the other marines either hadn't realized it was on purpose, or didn't care, Luffy couldn't tell which.

Fuck, I can't fight them both, and they are pressing me so hard I can't even bring out my jutte! Time to break out my next trick. With that, Luffy began to dodge in a spiral, concentrating on defense for now.

He also began to taunt his opponents even as he forced his own battle aura to become slightly chill. Not the Soul of Ice, but simply cold and controlled. "So, Smokey, I see ya haven't learned any new tricks since the last time we fought. Come on man I keep telling you to up your game, and what do ya do? Keep on using the same technique thinking it'll have to work this time. Where I'm from that's what we call an example of stupidity."

As Smoker snarled at that and pressed his attacks so much that the smoke began to billow out enough to encapsulate the entire ship Luffy turned his taunts on Doberman. "And you Doberman, was your mama a prophet naming you after a dog, or were you born that ugly? I bet parents have to hide small children when you're around, less you scar them for life!"

Doberman didn't react right off the bat, simply sneering and attacking Luffy all the harder, knowing that Luffy was trying to rattle them. "You will die here Mugiwara no Luffy. Then I will take your crew and execute them one and all. No pirate like you can be allowed to live in this era, no new power can be allowed to grow to challenge the peace we maintain. For Absolute Justice you must die!"

"Wow, do you even hear the shit you're spewin'? Peace, where the hell was your peace in Alabasta when one of your precious Shichibukai went rogue? Hell you didn't even know about it until me and my crew got involved! So you're not only a

loyal dog, but a blind one, though there at least you're in good company."

That line from the pigtailed pirate seemed to touch a nerve in a lot of the marines around him and he smiled grimly as he felt their anger and hate heating the air almost. Among them was Tashigi who looked particularly incensed, and guilty to Luffy's eyes. Even better though, not even Doberman had noticed he was moving in a spiral.

With that in mind e continued his mocking assault. "Or is that what this is all about? You're jealous I was able to fight and beat someone neither of you would have been able to? I don't blame you for that I suppose. As For you Doberman, where in the hell did you ever hear the idea of justice being an absolute? Or that you people serve it? What part of the Tenryubito having slaves serves justice? No Doberman, you serve those in power, nothing more. In fact, ya might say at least lately my crew and I are the ones who've been serving justice, not you marines."

That finally got through Doberman's control, and he snarled, the heat of his hate and rage now adding to the rest of the crowd. A second later Tashigi found herself in the air tossed over the side between one second and the next, Luffy having grabbed her stabbing blade and twisted so fast she could barely follow what had happened. Moments later five more very young looking marines joined her, as Luffy changed his defensive tactics for a brief second. *That's for helping Nami out Tash, as for the rest of you, none of you have to be caught in this.*

This let Smoker's next attacks through Luffy's defenses, but an instant later Luffy stepped into the center of the spiral. "Hiryu Shoten Ha," he whispered, his hand thrusting upwards towards Doberman who had just leaped into the air over a marine to bring his sword down.

Before the two blows could meet the spiral of cold and warm pressure did its work and a tornado spiraled into existence. The marines had barely a second to gape before they were all caught up in the tornado and hurled into the air. With them went the wreckage scattered around the deck of the ship, their weapons and anything not nailed down and a lot that was, including the collapsed masts. Then the wind began to tear into the structure of the ship.

Safe standing as the center of the storm Ranma scowled, shaking his head. He didn't want to kill the normal marines his technique had just scooped up, not really, but with the wind speed and the flotsam and jetsam already picked up he knew many of them would be dead by the time they were thrown out of the tornado. Doberman too would probably be hammered into submission at the very least. Smoker though might have it worse in a way, since he would no doubt have a devil of a time reforming

himself with the amount of wind tossing his smoke around right now.

With those two dealt with, Luffy moved off, hopping just over the water for a moment before he was out of range of the tornado, which continued to twist behind him, slowly tearing both galleons into wreckage.

OOOOOOO

With the two newest galleons being so thoroughly taken care of, Nami was able to direct the two pirate ships further westward, skirting their arcs of fire. With their masts gone and dragging both ships couldn't turn to try and follow them, but they had cut the angle so well the two pirate ships still had to spend several long minutes under their fire at range.

At the same time however, Hina had arrived on the scene. While Smoker had turned aside to help out against Luffy Hina hadn't, attacking Zoro, Chopper and Bon Clay with speed and ruthlessness. She charged forward, her hands outstretched and Bon barely dodged having his body caught full on by her cage. Instead he tried to leap over it, only to have his legs caught in the steel handcuffs.

As Bon dropped down, Hina moved on, attacking Chopper next. "Ara, and one mystery seems to have been solved. A pity really, your other form was rather cute, and I dislike the idea of fighting such a cute creature. Hina saddened."

Just then she dodged to one side as a sword went through where she had been standing. Another blow nearly took her in the side, but was pulled back as she put her arm up, activating her power. Turning she glared at the pirate hunter, who smirked back at her, his teeth clenched around the hilt of a sword even a non-sword user like Hina could tell was a quality blade. "Then, how about you throw down with me instead huh Marine Captain?"

"Roronoa Zoro? Gladly." Hina replied, racing forward. Zoro however, kept his distance, wary of her power, jabbing and slicing always moving, never really engaging strength to strength. In reply Hina used her Tekkai and her style to match his movements, all the while trying to use her power to halt his movement. His blows weren't quite able to tag her with enough power to break through Hina's Tekkai, but she was still getting cut here and there.

Out on the pirate ships, Sanji noticed this and snarled, hopping into the air and kicking a cannonball right back to the ship, not aiming at the ship but his own crewman. "Hey you shitty swordsman, that's no way to treat a lady!"

Twisting quickly, Zoro was able to deflect the cannonball away, roaring back in

reply. "Are you an idiot as well as an ero-cook, curly-brow!? She's an enemy before she's a woman!!"

"While I agree with the sentiment, you looked away from your opponent, so who's the real moron here?" Hina said then racing forward. Before Zoro could get, away Hina's transformed arms had passed through him at the shoulder and waist, locking his arms against his body.

Zoro collapsed, and that just left Chopper, who had continued to decimate the crew of the galleon, his strength and speed more than able to deal with them. Hina turned in Chopper's direction, ignoring the cursing Zoro behind but paused, staring out toward her flagship and Smoker's ship. "What the...!!!"

At her shout Chopper and the marines turned to look in the same direction only for their jaws to drop in shock at what looked like a tornado which had just descended onto one of the marine ships. Others too were staring while Zoro, having twisted around to see what everyone was gaping at, nodded his head knowingly. "AH, so that's what he meant earlier. Yeah, that's a show stopper for sure."

Even the two pirate crews were staring. Then Nami shook her head, calculating speedily how the tornado was affecting the local weather before turning to the Okama crew around her. "What the hell are you all just standing and gaping for!? This is the Grand Line after all. For now, let's use this! That seems to have taken the fight out of those last two galleons, so let's get out of here! Both ships hard to starboard, then trim the sails too..."

As Nami continued to bellow orders, so loud the man with the Den-Den Mushi simply held it out rather than relay them, Robin moved to the side of the Resolve, staring. *So, he can somehow create tornados too? I wonder why he didn't use that technique against Crocodile? Though then again he might have been able to counter it. Still, a fascinating ability, one I have never heard the like of before. Yet another mystery to add to the pile of such my captain seems to be.*

Before Hina could really come to terms with what she was seeing, Luffy had crossed the intervening distance between the galleon she was currently on with the three pirates and the one he had been fighting on. Landing he smirked at Hina. "Yo, Pinkie. Sorry I can't stay and chat, but our rides about to leave without us. So why don't you just let my first mate and friend there both go and you can start trying to help your friends over there?"

"Hina is not Pinkie! Hina enraged!" Hina scowled, raising her hands into a boxing stance and charging forward. Luffy took a step back then began dodging, noting she had actually added a bit more to her style, using more kicks than before.

And she was much better at activating and deactivating her power, watching his hands and feet closely to know when he was bringing out his Haki.

“Heh, yep, I’d definitely say you’re a better rival than Smokey, at least you’re not a one trick pony like he is. Still, like I said I,” Before he could speak further Luffy’s danger sense tingled and he dove to the side, rolling as something incredibly fast slammed into and through the deck he had been standing on a second ago.

Luffy had to dodge again, this time grabbing at the unconscious marine he had landed on, dragging him out of the way and glaring up at Doberman, who stood in midair over the ship. the man’s clothing was somewhat shredded, and he was bruised from head to toe, but for all of that he was still in the fight. One hand held a penny, which he had just somehow flicked at Amiguriken speeds, or perhaps even faster.

“Oy Doggie, ya nearly killed yer own guy there!” Luffy said, growling the words. To his mind there was nothing worse than a commander who killed his own men. That was why he still felt that he personally had failed as a captain when he had unknowingly put Nami in the way of Ms. Doublefinger.

“Sacrifices must be made in the pursuit of Absolute Justice! Even if we lost every marine here, I would count the day a victory so long as we can stop you. You are too dangerous to live Mugiwara no Luffy!” Doberman retorted before shouting out “Finger fusillade!”

From both his hands several pennies shot out at near supersonic speeds, crashing down like so many cannonballs aimed at Luffy. But Luffy jumped into the air to the side of the ship, which made the assault crash into the sea and the prow of the ship rather than the majority of the crew. The attacks which landed still smashed through the ship from top to bottom, and water began to gush in.

Glaring up at Doberman, Hina debated what to do now as Luffy reached Doberman, the two once more exchanging blows. She looked around as a hesitant voice asked. “Um, Captain, can you release me?”

She looked to see a marine she had accidentally captured in one of her manacles accidently. Nodding she touched the bars then ordered him and the others to gather up their fellows and make for the life boats. “And make certain we keep a hold of Roronoa.” The little creature, Chopper, was nowhere in sight, but he could be found after the majority of the crew had evacuated the now sinking ship.

She then turned to glare up at the ongoing battle. She would follow the others after the majority of her sailors had evacuated. She didn’t notice the marine she had freed hustling Zoro off to a lifeboat, or how he grabbed Zoro’s swords from the

deck as Chopper appeared from under the canvas of the lifeboat.

Zoro grunted as Chopper scrambled up to his head. ‘Fast thinking there Clay.’

“Ara on first name terms are we now Zoro-kun~? Thank you, but I think it’s time we left yeah?” Bon Clay asked, not changing back. He threw his arms around Zoro’s shoulders and Zoro grunted again.

Despite his two passengers however, Zoro was able to kick off into the air, though he dropped nearly into the ocean a second later. Chopper nearly squealed in fear, but kept from saying anything, knowing they were trying to sneak away. And a second later Zoro righted himself, and began to bounce just above the surface of the ocean towards the two pirate ships.

“Ara, why are you making for my ship instead of your own Zoro-kun~?” Bon asked.

“I want to give the aho-cook a piece of my mind. No, I tell I lie, I just want to cut him into pieces.” Zoro growled out.

To that the other two pirates could only nod and while the marines were busy trying to evacuate their ship they made their way to the Okama pirate’s ship. there several hundred hands removed Bon Clay and Chopper from Zoro’s back, depositing them both on the deck. Looking to the east Zoro could see Robin standing at the stern of the Resolve.

Hopping over the side of the ship Zoro looked around, eager to attack Sanji despite the fact his hands were still cuffed to his body, but they found Sanji already unconscious with Makino standing over him, huffing and shaking a shattered rifle out to one side. “We are seriously going to need to train him to not act like that towards enemies of the female persuasion.” She looked over at Zoro, grimacing at the sight of him still in the large handcuffs. “Can you get out of that?”

Shaking his head, Zoro turned to look back up at the fight still going on in the air above them. “No, but that doesn’t matter. Tell Nami to keep going, Luffy will catch up with us. We need to get out of here before more marines arrive.”

Above them in midair, Doberman was once again having fits with Luffy’s ability to redirect the momentum of his attacks in order to stay in the air, freeing his legs up for kicks. His sword was long gone, shattered in the tornado. And his Haki was slowly going too, only his Tekkai and his ability to keep up with Luffy’s speed was letting him fight Luffy evenly. But he still wasn’t giving up.

For his part Luffy too was hurting. Doberman’s ability with Haki was better than his, as was his mastery of Tekkai, and Luffy Haki had faded as the fight went on

just like Doberman's. At this point he couldn't call it up at all. Luffy knew he had broken several bones during this battle, though his ki healing had healed him up quick enough for it to not have slowed him down much.

But Luffy's speed and skill was better than the older man's. He was also still planning, while Doberman was simply trying to rely on his fighting instincts, where again Luffy had an advantage.

This was why Luffy had spent the last several minutes trying to only attack Doberman's upper body and head. When Luffy judged that his opponent had begun to only anticipate attacks coming at his upper body he suddenly blocked a blow upwards, using the momentum of that to go down in the air, where he used Geppo once more. And like Luffy had hoped this move caught Doberman by surprise.

This was why he wasn't able to activate Tekkai before Luffy shouted "Moko Takabasha double!" firing the ki blasts point blank from his hands into Doberman's kneecaps from the side. The ki blasts fired off from point-blank range, and there was an oddly sound mixing the crack of a bone and a sound like 'splut' as Doberman's knees suddenly turned into so much mush.

"AGFH!!!" Doberman screamed in agony. His Geppo cut out instantly and he began to fall towards the ocean below. Yet even as he did, he tried to strike out at Luffy one last time, punching out as he fell.

Luffy however grabbed his arm around his wrist and hopped further up into the air. Now he stood at an angle where Doberman couldn't attack him, and he gritted his teeth, glaring up at the pirate. "Do you expect me to beg pirate?"

"No." Luffy said, biting back all the sarcastic comments he could shout at the man, before simply shaking his head then ducking backwards as another penny zoomed up through the space where his chin had been a moment before. Scowling he raised his fist. "I just mean to make certain that even if you're pulled out of the drink, you won't be coming after my crew again."

Without another word Luffy began to hammer blows into Doberman's elbow continuously. Doberman tried again and again to fire one of his special Finger Bombs up at Luffy, but Each time Luffy dodged and then Doberman's Haki failed at last. He tried to use Tekkai, but even that eventually failed, and his elbow joined his knees in ruin.

Luffy pulled the man up, until he was once more face to face with Luffy, uncaring of the hundreds of marines who were watching the action from their lifeboats or ruined ships as he stared into Doberman's pain and rage-filled eyes. His voice for once was utterly devoid of humor, his blue eyes dark. "You killed one of your own

people and would've killed more to get at me on top of threatening my nakama. Any other pirate would simply kill you. But I'm going to give your men, the same men you cut down to get to me, a chance to save your life. I wonder if they'll think you're worth it. Remember this moment Doberman, and know that if we ever meet again, I won't be nearly as kind."

To his surprise, Doberman pulled out a knife somehow with his one still working hand and tried to stab Luffy. But Luffy caught it between his fingers and wrenched it out of the man's hand before opening his other hand. He hopped there in midair watching Doberman fall towards the ocean below.

Moments later Luffy landed on Bon Clay's ship, and smirked at Zoro. "Yo Zoro, didn't think ya were into bondage."

"Shut up and get me out of this thing! And then you, me, and curly-brows are going to have to have a talk about how exactly I got into this mess."

"Hai, Hai," Luffy said, reaching forward to wrench apart Zoro's manacles. Even as he freed his first mate however Luffy's thoughts were on the man he had just left behind, dead or alive he really didn't care. If Doberman came after him again, he had seen enough of the man's style to take him apart, if not easily than certainly far easier than the fight he had just finished. *Still, there are going to be a lot of consequences from this. I'm going to have to step up my personal training, and that of my crew too.*

Chopper, Makino and even the unconscious Sanji shivered, as did Nami and Robin on the Resolve. "What was that?" Nami asked worriedly, looking around in fear.

"I don't know, but for some reason I don't think it was anything good," Robin said. "It was almost like someone was walking over our graves, while we were being buried alive within them."

"Gah such a horrifying imagination Robin!" Nami shuddered, before shaking off the feeling quickly and shouting orders to the Okama pirates aboard the Resolve and the communications man. The Okama ship broke off seeming to head off in one direction while the Resolve followed another, but once out of sight of the marines and with the help of the Geppo users they would come together again before once more going their separate ways. Both ships were badly battered, but still seaworthy. The Straw Hat/Okama pirate alliance had won, they had escaped Alabasta.

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“Utter defeat,” Hina muttered as her troopers rowed their lifeboat towards where they had seen Doberman go down. While she personally would have liked to, there would no doubt be repercussions if she left him to drown as he deserved. Akainu would be furious at the loss of one of his protégés and would find out about it in time. Indeed, she wondered what repercussions there would be for Luffy and his crew from this.

They didn't just escape us, they beat us utterly! Two schooners heavily damaged, two galleons sunk and two more galleons complete write offs even if they are both still floating for some reason. The two ships caught in Luffy's tornado had their decks and masts simply ripped off, losing all of their upper structure. But the rest of their hulls were relatively undamaged. Their crews were also relatively intact, ironically thanks to Doberman's orders which kept the gun crews below decks at their stations. Neither ship was going anywhere though except under tow.

*The only ship still capable of combat is the galleon of an officer who avoided combat!! Hina furious, Hina **beyond** furious. Hina will have that man's head for this!* Though if another galleon's cannons would have changed the outcome she didn't know, the act of cowardice in the face of the enemy was a hanging offense. One Hina could order as the man's commanding officer given the number of witnesses.

Smoker grunted beside her. He had actually reformed somewhat quickly having realized what the winds would do to him if he stayed in smoke form. Despite that his clothing was shredded, his upper body a visible mass of black and blue with truly magnificent shiner to boot and numerous other wounds despite his ability to use Tekkai. He would still have drowned however after escaping the tornado if not for Tashigi and several others taking turns to keep him above water until a lifeboat arrived to pull them out.

“Doberman couldn't defeat Mugiwarara!” He growled, butting the tip off a new cigarette before spitting it out, realizing that it was soggy from his trip into the ocean. “But then again, can't say I blame him. After all, who the hell would have figured Mugiwarara could just create a hurricane like that?”

“True, but look on the bright side, at least this way the higher-ups won't think we didn't do all in our power to stop them.” Tashigi said. Of all of them she was the only one not visibly sporting an injury, but in her case her pride had once more been pricked badly by what had occurred. Having her life spared by Luffy's deliberate actions before he launched his attack irked her something fierce, as it did the pride of the other marines Luffy had thrown overboard instead of letting them get caught in his tornado. But they were the only ones who had been on the deck of the ship that

was still alive after the battle.

"I wonder how he did it? Hina curious," Hina said in an almost detached manner before rounding on both the other marines. "I'm not going to let this go Smoker-kun! Two pirate ships escaped here, two pirate crews escaped **me** Black Cage Hina, and made a mockery of my tactics and men. I'm not going to let that stain on my reputation stand, and I'm not going to stand by and let the Marines be brushed aside like this! I'm going after them. Hina determined! What about you?"

That this might save them both from any negative impact from Doberman's defeat and possible death, after all they hadn't found him just yet, was not said.

Smoker started to nod slowly, but then sighed, changing the nod into a shake. "No. It's pretty obvious I need to either come up with a new seastone weapon, or train myself to use haki before I challenge Mugiwara again. Chase after him now if you want to Hina, but I am going to pull off for now. Until I have learned Haki and mastered it to a level where I can challenge him there's no point."

Hina's lips twitched into a smirk. "Ara, does that mean you agree with him that I'm Luffy's rival now? Hina amused." Growling Smoker turned away, causing Hina to laugh loudly for a moment before she moved off to order her troops and commander the galleon who had refused battle as her new flagship. *We'll meet again Mugiwara no Luffy, be sure of it!*

End Chapter

Doberman, for those who don't remember, is the Marine Vice-admiral who shot one of his own men during the Buster Call at Enies Lobby. Given that, and the fact he's a protégé of Akainu, I don't think his words or actions are out of character. I'll admit part of me wanted to kill him off, but that would surely have set Akainu himself on Luffy's trail, and he's not ready for that matchup yet. I also thought Raffy would see leaving it to his people, who he was willing to sacrifice, to save him was poetic irony.

Vivi's actions: I've hinted that she had a bit of a crush on Raffy several times, and I thought that a young girl would possibly act like this, even a princess. But I also think Raffy's response is spot on for his personality.

Anyway hope you all enjoyed this, including the fight against the marines. Since this was my first large scale sea battle I'd like to know everyone's thought about it. Just remember how sea battles go in the original One Piece before filleting me please LOL.

