

Name ain't Oda or Takahashi.

This has been betaed by Michael and Hiryo... this means there shouldn't be very many small mistakes. Here's hoping anyway. Anyway, on with the show.

## Chapter 7: New Friends and New Enemies

Though it was still raining several hours later, the schooner they had appropriated in Logue Town sliced through wind and wave like the shark of the sea it was supposed to be, a marked contrast to the *Inglorious Bastard*. Wearing rain coats, Nami and Sanji remained outside, with Nami at the tiller and Sanji working the sails at her orders at need. Since both the topsail and the foresail had self-tacking rigs, this was rather easy even for a single person, as long as they were strong and fast enough, which Sanji was. As for the others, Makino was putting her and Nami's possessions away in the first mate's quarters, while Luffy and Zoro were exploring the ship, not having had time before they left port to look at their new acquisition.

Unlike the *Bastard*, the schooner had only two floors to it, excluding the captain's quarters which was in the raised afterdeck of the ship. The second floor was devoted to its broadside cannons, supply lockers, and pantry. On the first floor was a very small brig, a hospital bay, a first officer's cabin, the crew's living quarters, and a small mess hall. It also had an equally small communication room.

That room was where Luffy and Zoro finished their tour. "What should we do with that?" Zoro asked, glancing at the Den-Den Mushi in marine colors set on the small table against the inner wall. Next to it was the box which held the communication group that Sanji had bought.

"Keep it," Luffy said with a shrug. Luffy was still in his female form, seeing no point to changing back since rain was still falling outside. "We might be able to use it to listen in on marine communications in the area we're sailing through. But we should probably remove the speaker portion, just in case."

With that accomplished the two of them left to head to the crew quarters. This room was marked on both sides by rows of bunk beds, as well as several hammocks tied in the center of the room to wooden pillars, the portion of the masts which had been sunk into the ship's deck. There were at least thirty-two bunks and eight hammocks, which made sense: though the ship wouldn't need nearly that large a

crew even in harsh conditions to sail the ship, this was after all a fighting vessel. The guns would need specially trained crews and gun deck officers. Some crew would be trained to work with the bosun to repair damage and evacuate the injured to the medical bay, while other crewmen, the ones trained most to be pure sailors, would see to the sails and steering.

Looking over the space for a moment as well as the two large pillars stuck in the center Luffy shook his head. "Considering what those pillars are, I'm afraid this area just won't do for a training area. Pity."

Moving through the crew quarters they found a small shower area at the far end which had four simple stalls without any doors to them. Around a small walkway at the end of this was an equally small area with six small mirrors and a long basin. "Nami isn't going to like this, nor is Makino," Luffy mused then looked back over his shoulder at the bunk beds. "Okay let's take apart half of those beds. We can use the wood from them to make doors for these stalls, though we should probably also get a lock on this door. The others we can change into at least twin or possibly even queen-size beds for everyone else."

"What about the orange haired witch's trees?" Zoro asked. "Not that I care but wouldn't she prefer us to plant them somewhere?"

"That can wait a bit, being in those pots won't hurt them for a few days, and I'd bet she and Makino would prefer better and more private showers to that." Luffy replied. "Besides, we don't have any idea yet where to put them."

Zoro nodded, and the two of them went to work removing the bedding, taking apart the bunk beds. Then Luffy used the slats from underneath the bunks to create two doors, backing them up with larger pieces of wood from the sides of the bed after Zoro had cut them in half along their length. While Luffy was nailing the doors together, Zoro removed the intervening wall between each of the stalls. Once they were finished, the crew had two larger than average shower stalls with two primitive doors leading into them.

Luffy frowned then, bouncing slightly as he sat on the pile of mattresses. "Yeah these suck. I mean I'd prefer a futon to these things; they aren't soft, nor do they have much support. How the hell do marines sleep on these things? I'm used to roughing it, but not if I don't have to."

"Pity you couldn't carry a few mattresses in that ki space thing of yours," Zoro said with a chuckle.

Luffy laughed too, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry, never thought of it really. Still, we've got enough of these mattresses to make beds for everyone that are four or

so deep, so they'll do for now." He turned away from Zoro to gaze at the remaining bunk beds, since they had only taken apart six of them. That left twenty-six, which gave Luffy more than enough wood to make new beds for them all. Though that would take much longer than the doors, which were a relatively easy project.

"Where'd you learn how to do so much carpentry?" Zoro asked.

"I first learned some of it while on Ji-Kure's ship before he dropped me off with Makino for the first time," Luffy said with a shrug, though of course that wasn't really the case. He had first learned carpentry like this as part of Martial Arts Construction as Ranma.

"I also did odd jobs around the bar for Makino. I'm not an expert or anything, but I'm good with my hands," Luffy said with somewhat false modesty. "For now though, let's just move the mattresses into piles in the other rooms, then take the beds apart and separate the wood into different piles."

Zoro nodded, and the two of them bent to their work once more.

About an hour after they had begun that project, Sanji poked his head into the guest quarters just as they were finishing with the last few bunks. "Hey shitheads, Nami-chan wants us all up on deck."

Luffy nodded and the three went up on deck where they found Nami and Makino waiting for them. Nami nodded forward, holding up a spyglass which she had bought in Logue Town. It was both of a better quality and more durable than the one she had been using up until then. "We're within sight of the Red Line!"

Luffy and the others turned in that direction, and stared at what was coming up over the horizon. Dominating the horizon from one end to another was a wall, a monstrously huge mountain of stone which was called the Red Line. It was a literal mountain of rock, so tall the top couldn't be seen even from this far out, and obscured by clouds. It was so wide it acted like a ring of islands along the equator of the world, working with the two Calm Belts and the Grand Line itself to separate the world into the four oceans. Up top on of that massive escarpment was the Holy Land Mariejoa, the largest and most powerful nation in the world, seat of the World Government.

Against that backdrop, barely visible from this distance with the spyglass, was a stream of water that was going upwards. "Reverse Mountain..." Luffy breathed, smiling widely, handing the spyglass to Sanji who looked into it in turn.

There were two ways you could get into the Grand Line. One way as to brave the Calm Belt, a wide band of ocean where there were no wind or currents, and which was further dominated by massive sea beasts. The other way was to use Reverse Mountain, where a stream of cold pressure somehow pushed water up the mountain

and then back down into the Grand Line.

Luffy and Makino had explained the phenomenon before, but Sanji and Zoro still stood gaping at it, as did Luffy, who, although knowing about it, had never actually seen it before. She'd been asleep the time that Garp had taken him from the Grand Line into East Blue. Even Nami looked a little askance as the stream became close enough to see with the naked eye.

But her mind quickly turned to more important things. "We're coming in on the mountain at the right angle, but the wind's picking up from the Northeast, so I want all hands on the deck for this bit. I want one of you boys on the tiller, preferably you Luffy. You're the strongest."

"We have something more important to do first though," Luffy said seriously. Everyone turned to her and she smirked, pointing up the crow's nest. "We have to hang our flag. No pirate in their right mind is going to ever enter the Grand Line without already having their pirate flag flying."

The rest of the crew smiled at that, and Makino excused herself for a moment. She came back with a rolled up piece of fabric, which she quickly displayed to them all. "I worked on this a few years ago when I realized that Luffy not only was going to always follow his dream, but that I was going to go with him. She paused smirking over at Luffy. "Well that and the fact that he has no artistic skills whatsoever."

"You don't have to be mean about it," Luffy said, pouting a little even as she looked at the flag with approval. It was a simple design, with a straw hat set on its side in the background and a smiling skull marked by a ponytail in the foreground. "I suppose we can add a few things for each of our crewmen at some point. Like put a tangerine in one corner and so forth? Make the flag a sign of our all being in this together?"

While Nami smiled approval of the idea, Zoro nodded. "Three swords in the corner for me I suppose."

"That works, but what will we do for Sanji? A curly brow, maybe?" Luffy asked innocently.

"You wound me with those words Luffy-chan!" Sanji said, then caught himself and shuddered, staring with something like irritation at the redheaded girl for a moment before turning away. His face looked as if he was close to throwing up, but at the same time there were actual tears in his eyes and he was muttering under his breath.

"Wow, it really is a psychosis," Nami murmured to Makino as they stared at the chef.

“Agreed. I don't think he can actually help himself,” Makino said with what Nami would categorize as amused pity. “Still, funny for us though.”

Luffy scaled the topmast like a monkey, hanging the flag on top of the crow's nest before leaping down, landing lightly. “Now we're ready.” She grinned at Nami, who gave her a thumbs-up and began to shout out orders as Luffy moved to the tiller.

As the redhead did so, Nami continued to spout out orders. “We're going to have to keep to the center of the passage, let the current do the work for us, but if we lose our way or are pushed to the side by the wind we'll have a devil of a time recovering before we smash into the walls.” She looked seriously around the rest of the crew. “This is going to be tough and extremely dangerous, so when I say jump I want you to do it!”

“Shouldn't one of us be ready with one of the oars just in case?” Zoro asked.

Nami thought for a bit, then looked over to Sanji and Makino, then up into the sails, reading for a moment. “All right, that's a good idea. Grab one of the oars and keep it ready, but you'll still have to help with the rigging until that's needed.”

By this point this sails had brought them within sight of the base of the Reverse Mountain stream, and Nami's prediction of their being spot on proved to be accurate. They had a bit of a scare at one point just as the stream's current grabbed their boat and began to push them up the mountain and the wind changed direction on them a little faster than Nami had anticipated. But thanks to Zoro's quick reaction with the oar and Luffy's strong hands on the tiller, the schooner quickly righted itself. A second later, Nami ordered the crew to furl the sails and the current grabbed them, pushing them up the mountain as smooth as could be.

“YAHOOO!!!” Luffy howled, grinning as the ship picked up speed heading **UP** a mountain while she and the others all cheered and shouted congratulations to one another.

However, none of the crew had time to look around them. Even Nami, who had pitched in to furl the sails for a second, didn't notice that as they had been closing on Reverse Mountain another ship had appeared on the horizon behind them.

OOOOOOO

Usopp was in the crow's nest of the Little Top as the ship moved through the storm towards Reverse Mountain. Little Top was a temporary name for a temporary ship, and rather plain in comparison to its current captain's previous ships. It was still the same ship Alvida had shown up with at the marine base, but all of its markings had

been removed before they even arrived at Logue Town. With its cannons pulled in and covered by flaps which blended in with the rest of the ship, the Little Top looked like a simple merchant ship. Except for the sails, anyway, which the large crew had switched out the moment they were away from Logue Town, and the pirate flags. At the moment it was flying Buggy's mark from the mainmast, and Alvida's from the prow.

But Usopp wasn't concentrating on the look of his own ship at the moment. Instead, he was staring through his spyglass at the ship whose wake he had noticed a few hours back. They weren't actually following the stolen marine ship per se, though Buggy was rather confused about what Roronoa Zoro, who had helped the bounty hunter girl take out his original crew, was doing as a pirate now rather than with 'Bounty Hunter Ranko.'

That wasn't the reason they were going in the same direction as the former marine schooner, though. Buggy wanted to return to the Grand Line, and this was the only real way to get there from East Blue. Buggy figured that if he could hide in among other larger bounties, he might be able to wait out the heat from the massacre he'd been framed for.

Usopp, of course, couldn't be happier. He was chasing his dream of being a great warrior of the sea, and going to the Grand Line was part of that dream, even if he'd had to leave his beloved sling behind, replacing it with a series of guns.

But right now, there was something else on his mind. "Err, Buggy, what did that bounty hunter that captured you and Alvida look like again?" he shouted, not turning from staring ahead of them.

"We've been over this," Buggy growled from below, where he was manning the tiller. He had ridden Reverse Mountain several times already, and wasn't about to trust anyone else at the tiller of his ship, no matter how temporary. That, and their crew didn't actually have a navigator at present. "She had red hair, was on the short side, dressed like a tomboy almost, and had somewhat broad shoulders. Why?"

"Well, there's a redhead that looks sort of like that on that ship out there."

"What!?" Buggy shouted. An instant later his head detached at the neck, sailing up towards Usopp. Usopp twitched at the sight, not having gotten used to Buggy's Devil Fruit yet, but willingly held up the eyeglass and the head moved into position to stare through it. "That's her! Is she in cahoots with that pirate crew? Come to think of it... That Luffy character did fight a bit like her..." Buggy mused to himself as he began to descend. "Are they brother and sister maybe?"

Once his head was once more where it should be, Buggy shouted at his crew to get them moving faster and to run out the cannons. "Vengeance will be mine!"

Alvida came out on deck dressed in a long cloak, frowning up at Buggy. "What's going on?" When Buggy explained, Alvida's eyes widened. "Wait, if those two are working together that means we might want to rethink this."

"What do you mean?" Buggy asked angrily. "I thought you wanted revenge just as much as I did."

"I do," Alvida said coolly, staring up into the sky where the storm showed no sign of letting up. While the Sube-Sube fruit made the rain run off her body, her clothing was still getting damp, and she was eager to head back inside. She looked around at the crew, a mix of her own crew, a few survivors from Buggy's original crew, and all the surviving Black Cat pirates except for the hypnotist, who had apparently escaped from the marine base during Buggy and Kuro's duel. A lot of them were terrified at the idea of heading into the Grand Line, but weren't willing to try mutiny just yet.

Realizing they shouldn't be arguing before the crew like this, Alvida gestured over her shoulder to the officers' quarters. Buggy nodded and followed her, and Alvida continued her argument the moment they were alone once more. "That doesn't mean I'm one to get stupid about it. We saw that Luffy character outfight a Marine Commodore. We both know how good Ranko is, and we also saw Zoro's obvious skill against the marines and your old crew too. We can't assume we could win in a boarding action."

"Then we'll blow them up flashily from long-range," Buggy growled. "I'll back my special Buggy Balls against any regular cannon ball any day."

"While trying to stop them from boarding us?" Alvida asked archly. "Luffy and Ranko at least can both use that Geppo move, can't they? And that doesn't even consider Zoro or this Black Leg Sanji who's supposed to be on their crew. Besides, that's a Marine schooner out there. It might not have as many cannons in each broadside as us, but it's fast. If we don't take out their rigging right away, it could dance rings around us at range."

Buggy frowned, tugging at his big red nose for a moment thinking, but eventually he had to nod agreement. "You're right. The Little Top isn't a match for a real ship of war like that as long as it's handled well. And if they know Geppo, and Luffy at least knows Rankyaku, they might be able to defend themselves from our cannon fire anyway."

He nodded again more brusquely. "All right, we need more information about them and their abilities at the very least, so we'll keep following them for now. If we're close enough to them, we can still figure out their route even if we're in the

Grand Line. Besides, I might be able to gather some more crewmen on a few islands in Paradise. I..."

Buggy paused, looking around him, his eyes narrowing in surprise. Then he raced out of the cabin room with Alvida on his heels, wondering what had gone wrong. He stared around him as he burst out onto the deck, and almost ran over a crewman who had been about to fetch them. "Err, sir, ma'am, we've been sort of, well, becalmed. The storm just died out all of a sudden."

Where a moment ago the wind and rain had been hurling them around, now the ocean was calm, the storm gone. Buggy groaned, realizing what had happened. Reverse Mountain was within a few leagues of the other way to enter the Grand Line, and if you weren't careful the current and the waves could blow you straight into it. "You flashy morons, this isn't just a calm zone! We've entered the Calm Belt!"

"What's that?" Alvida asked, not having heard the term before.

"It's a zone separating the Grand Line from the other four oceans," Buggy replied between shouting orders at the crew to break out the oars. "There's no current and no wind here, **ever**. And it's also..."

Buggy broke off as the ocean all around them erupted and massive forms appeared there, soon towering over the ship. "A breeding ground for flashy huge Sea Kings!" The nearest beast opened its mouth to roar and charge the boat and Buggy groaned. "Oh flashy fuck me..."

OOOOOOO

Whooping and hollering, Luffy balanced on the prow of the as-yet-unnamed ship as it zoomed up Reverse Mountain, the current and the wind behind them now pushing the schooner along at a speed he had never expected a ship to be able to reach. The view wasn't all that great, of course. The mist was heavy in the air, and sheer rock walls rose high above them on either side, so high that even if she'd been in the crow's nest or bouncing above the ship via Geppo, she wouldn't have been able to see the top. Even so, Luffy was eager for her first view of the Grand Line.

With the tiller tied in place, Zoro and the others had joined the redhead, and all five of them whooped and hollered as they zoomed first up, then rapidly down the mountain. Even with the sunlight beating on them on this side, and no rain to speak of, the fog was pretty heavy as they descended back down. Still, all of them were ebullient at this, their first step into the Grand Line.



Then Nami cocked her head. "What's that?"

Luffy cocked her head in turn, staring around at the others. "Some kind of animal call?"

It was a deep, lowing sort of noise, reverberating around the mountain pass and off the water. "It sounds sort of like a foghorn," Sanji muttered, cupping a cigarette against the wind as he lit it. "Albeit deeper. It would have to be a huge foghorn to be that loud."

Nami stared ahead of them, her eyes going almost comically wide as a huge black object appeared out of the mist ahead of them, dead center in the pass. "W, what the heck is that!?" Everyone else turned and stared as Nami panicked, running back to the tiller, untying it, and staring at the object and then to either side, trying to see if there was maybe room for them to somehow dodge the thing.

"That almost looks like a giant black whale," Luffy murmured, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side.

"Whatever it is, it is in our way isn't it?" Makino said just as calmly. "This ship is rather sturdy, but if that whale is as tough as its size indicates, it could smash our entire ship."

"Drop our anchor?" Luffy asked as behind her both Zoro and Sanji panicked, the one staring with his eyes wide open, and the other racing around shouting how he would save the ladies if it killed him.

"We would probably rip out the anchor at the speed we're going," Makino replied, shaking her head.

"Would you two at least panic a little bit!?" Nami shouted shrilly from where she had abandoned the tiller to race up to them, her hands waving wildly. Luffy winced. She liked Nami, but she needed to get better at rolling with the punches in moments like this.

She patted Nami's shoulder once, then leaped into the sky, hopping up higher and higher so she could see around the giant black mountain of a whale. It definitely was a whale; its mouth was open and making that noise now. However, Ranma also saw something else: a small lighthouse perched on a tiny outcrop of rock sticking out from the mountain. "Zoro! Sanji!" Luffy shouted, bouncing back down. "Give me all the rope we have aboard, and the extra anchor chain!"

All the spare rope aboard the ship was quickly gathered along with the spare anchor chain as the ship sped on its course down towards the giant whale. Luffy was quickly back in the air, with the rope circling her shoulders and waist, the end of it connected to the chain which Sanji quickly tied in place next to the original chain.

Moving almost too fast for even Zoro to follow, Luffy bounced through the air towards the lighthouse. Throwing the rope around it several times, Luffy then began to pull, pulling the ship to the side slowly. Too slowly, Luffy suddenly realized, but it was moving.

Grasping what Luffy was trying to do, Nami turned to the rest of the crew. "To the aft side cannons! Fire the cannons! The impetus of that and Luffy pulling on that rope might let us drag against the side of the canyon and pull us to a stop!"

Sanji and Zoro raced down into the belly of the ship, each of them starting from a different end, and lit the cannons, shouting, "I bet I'll light more of them off than you will!" "No you moron, I'll light more than you!"

"God damnit, this isn't the time for a dick beating contest!" Makino shouted as she lit up the guns on one of the small pintle mounts, for what they were worth, while Nami lit the other one.

A second later the cannons fired in a long stream of fire, pushing the ship off course in the same direction Luffy's rope was pulling them. The combination worked, and the ship slammed into the side of the canyon, slowly scraping and screeching to a stop as the rocks of the crevasse crunched into the schooner's side. It ripped out several of the cannons on that side, crushing them or hurling them out of their runs. Splinters flew, like the ship had just taken a few cannon ball hits of its own. But it worked, and no one was injured, despite several close calls.

Nami was the closest, only dodging a few splinters by the skin of her teeth, and she would have been hit by one in her thigh, but Sanji, who had raced back up on deck, smacked it aside with a quick kick. He stood quickly between her and the port where the splinters were coming from, his legs flashing. "You shitty splinters, you'll not mar the perfection that is Nami-chan, not as long as I'm around!"

Breathing out a sigh of relief, Luffy wiped her forehead, staring down at her hands which were quite sore at present, though if Luffy hadn't toughened his/her body they might well have been rubbed raw. "Well, it was a nice ship while it lasted, I suppose," she mused, shaking her head as she turned, staring at the damage done to their new ship.

Taking to the air once more, Luffy started to make her way back over to her crew, just as Sanji shouted. "Oy, you Shitty whale! You almost hurt Nami-chan!" He shouted, leaping off the prow of the ship and kicking the whale in the eye.

"Sanji!!!" Nami shouted, while Luffy just stared blankly from her current position in the air.

Suddenly the eye twisted, staring down at the ship. Then it fell back slightly,

and its maw opened, swiftly swallowing the ship whole.

"You have got to be kidding!" Luffy groaned, pulling back from where she had been about to dive towards the ship. "Hey, Moby Dick! Let my ship and crew go!"

Ignoring him, the whale backed up away from the Red Line and began to dive. "Oh hell, no!" Luffy shouted, landing and slamming a foot into the things back right behind its blowhole. It moaned a little in pain, and she shouted again, "Let them go!"

The redhead was about to use a Rankyaku on the whale, but then stopped and stared. Halfway down the whale's length from where he was and where the back of it was slowly disappearing into the water was a hatch set into the whale's back.

"You know," Luffy said to herself, "I thought I was ready for the craziness of the Grand Line. But I did not see this coming." With a brief smirk and a grin to herself, Luffy raced ahead towards the hatch, opening it and then closing it behind her just in time as the whale submerged itself totally.

Inside, the hatch led into a passage, lit along its length by small, contained gas lights. That was as much as Luffy could tell before the corridor tilted wildly in conjunction with the whale's movements. For normal people, the sensation of the whale sinking into the ocean then diving straight down would've thrown them off their balance, but Luffy was anything but normal. Instead of losing her footing and falling out of control, she bounced down the corridor like a bouncy ball on steroids, moving down the corridor with ease.

By Luffy's estimate, she had travelled through at least half of the creature without seeing any offshoots from the passage. "Whoever made this passage had a lot of time on his hands. And a lot of oil..." At that point Luffy stopped and stared at one of the little lights, then around at the whale. "Whale fat, right," she groaned, smacking her forehead.

A few minutes later, Luffy still hadn't seen any signs telling Luffy she was going the right direction, or any offshoots, but she did see two people kneeling in the center of the passageway. They both had large, bazooka-like hand guns in front of them, and were loading them as they talked to one another.

One was a blond young man looking a little older than Luffy, with an ungainly sort of body wearing a crown on his head, hose, doublet, and a good, rich looking jacket. He also had the number 9 written, or possibly tattooed, on each of his cheeks.

The other was a younger looking woman, who had her hair done up in a rather severe looking ponytail style, and was wearing a corset with light and dark blue stripes going around it in a diagonal pattern, offsetting the aqua of her jacket that she wore over it. The clothing made her look something like a vamp to Luffy's eyes, and

the way the hair tie pulled her hair back gave her an aloof, haughty appearance.

They looked up in shock as Luffy came into view, and the man raised his giant cannon towards Luffy, but Luffy halted her pace, standing on the ceiling using an old trick from 'his' life as Ranma to stick there like a spider. While Luffy wanted to keep many of his ki techniques a secret, this one was just too darn useful.

"Excuse me," the redhead said, bowing her head politely. "But would this passage lead to this whale's stomach?"

Thrown off by Luffy's blasé attitude the two nodded dully. "Oh, err, yes," the woman stammered, pointing past her shoulder. "It's that way. The corridor leads right to it."

"Thank you," Luffy said again, politely. Then, without another word, hopped over them heading in that direction.

Behind her the two strangers looked at one another. "Mr. 9, did that just happen?"

"If by that you mean an overly polite young woman with a straw hat on her head was bouncing along this corridor like a madman, then yes," the blond haired crown-wearer replied. Then he shook himself. "But never mind about that, we have to get this job over with! We can't allow that old man to stop us again. Whiskey Peak needs this whale meat!"

"Right, Mr. 9!" Miss Wednesday said, getting up quickly from where she had been crouching. "In that case, we should probably follow her, shouldn't we?"

"Indeed, and perhaps we can even use her. Unless she's after the meat as well," Mr. 9 said after a moment. Both of them looked at one another, then raced after Luffy, but she had already reached the end of the passage.

There was a small hatch like the one that had led into the passage, and Luffy opened it to the outside. Or what she thought was the outside, at first. "...Okay, someone had way too much time on his hands," she murmured, standing there for a moment and staring out around her at the sky.

The inside of the whale stomach was a large cavern, which Luffy had been expecting. What she had not been expecting was for it to be painted as if the sides of the cavern were the outside world, complete with birds here and there, clouds, and even a sun in the distance. The sun was actually providing light; a giant oil light of some kind was stuck there and radiating both heat and light. And down floating on the gastric juices was a small island, complete with tropical tree, house, and an old man sitting out on a lounge chair.

In front of it was their ship, resting at anchor currently, and Luffy could even

spot Makino and Nami holding the two other boys back from attacking the old man for some reason. As Luffy watched, Makino pulled away from Zoro, whipping out her pistol and shooting between the older man's ankles where he lay out on the lounge chair before he could move. "Enough with the running jokes!" she shouted, and Luffy blanched. *If Makino's self-control had eroded that badly, maybe it was a good thing I wasn't with them originally.*

Growling around his cigarette, Sanji turned away from the drama in front of him and was the first to spot Luffy standing in the opening in the side of the stomach. "All right there, captain?" he shouted, getting everyone else's attention as he waved. "For a first taste of the Grand Line, this kind of thing takes some beating! And here I thought your curse was unusual."

Luffy laughed, both in answer to Sanji's joke, and in relief at seeing her crew all right, and kicked out onto the air, hopping towards the ship slowly as she took in the rest of the view, only noticing now the dead squid stuck through with several harpoons lying next to the island. "The Grand Line: where even people like me can feel normal!"

The crew laughed, some with relief at seeing their captain all right, some with genuine amusement, while the old man looked on with narrowed eyes. "Geppo? They don't look like Marines, but that, and that ship..."

Just then they were interrupted by the two individuals Luffy had passed before sticking their heads out of the corridor. At the sight of them past Luffy, the old man groaned, swiftly getting up from his chair. "Those two!"

Luffy turned to look at them as they raised their cannons. "Too slow, old man! Fire, Miss Wednesday! Kill the whale!" shouted the man.

"Right, Mr. 9!" the woman answered, both of them ignoring Luffy and her ability to walk on air, concentrating on their target.

With that, they fired, and the old man raced forward. Reaching the end of the island he lept up to interpose his body between the cannonballs and the side of the whale's stomach.

Luffy frowned, but nonetheless quickly shot out a Rankyaku at the gastric juices below. The green juices erupted up into the path of the two cannonballs, which exploded right before they would hit the old man. The old man, with a surprised expression visible on his face, continued his leap of course, falling quickly into the green goop below.

"Mr. 9, she really is going to interfere with us it seems!" said the blue haired girl.

“Indeed, Miss Wednesday. Let’s deal with her first, and then the old man again!”

With that, the man wearing the crown, whose name was apparently Mr. 9, pulled out two metal bats. One of them separated, the end shooting forward on a chain to try and wrap around Luffy’s arm.

Luffy dodged it easily, then bounced forward back into the tunnel, pushing both of them back out of the entrance. Before either could leap back and try to get some more distance, a single punch threw the blond man backwards down the corridor unconscious.

Miss Wednesday quickly took the opportunity to cut at Luffy’s arm with tiny crystals on small chains which she had been carrying up her coat’s sleeves. She was quick, much quicker than her partner, but it didn’t help her at all. Her peacock slashers bounced off Luffy’s skin, not penetrating at all.

“Meh,” Luffy teased, giving her the evil eye, pulling down one of her eyelids and sticking out her tongue at the blue haired girl. It was childish, Luffy knew, but Luffy still sometimes practiced the ‘make them mad, make them stupid’ technique from the school of Anything Goes.

And it certainly worked here. The girl actually roared in anger, and came at Luffy slashing quickly, but the redhead bounced back out of the corridor. Miss Wednesday followed her, and Luffy smirked, gesturing downwards. “You might want to take care of that first!” she said, even as she dodged under one of the girl’s whirling attacks.

At the redhead’s words Miss Wednesday looked down, then up at her, and screamed as she plummeted downwards. Before she hit the gastric juices though, Luffy had already caught her by one of her legs, taking a moment to admire the view, since from this angle Luffy could see all of her legs and under her short skirt to the panties beneath, which actually matched the rest of her outfit, striped dark and light blue. *I ain’t a pervert, but I ain’t blind either, and she was sort of asking to be looked at given her getup.* “Give up?”

Staring down at the juices below her, then up at the redhead, Miss Wednesday nodded meekly. A second later she found herself quickly righted, carried under the other girl’s arm. “Who, who are you anyway?”

“Me?” Luffy asked, looking down at her with a smile. “I’m Monkey D. Luffy, the man who will be the next Pirate King!”

The blue-haired girl blinked at that, her brows wrinkling in confusion and then disdain as the last two words registered, shaking her head. *Just another rookie with a*

*bit of mouth and a few fancy tricks. She'll learn the reality about the Grand Line soon enough, though why did she call herself a man?*

After gathering the unconscious Mr. 9, Luffy deposited both on the schooner, then looked up as the old man pulled himself out of the juices, seemingly none the worse for wear. This close, Luffy could see that the juices were actually sort of slowly eating into the paint of the ship, and that the island wasn't an island at all, but another ship with a metal bottom to it. *Interesting.*

"So," she said after making certain the crew was all right. "One of you to want to tell me what this was about? And you, old man, considering that you've done all this to this 'poor' whale, can we assume that you can at least get our ship out of here?"

"That depends, girl, are you a pirate or a marine?" the bespectacled old man with the flower-like hair asked.

"You recognized one of the Rokushiki?" Luffy replied, one eyebrow rising in surprise as she looked at the old man, while Sanji returned from the inside of the ship with a tea set and a pot of heated water.

"Old Crocus has been around for a long time, girl," the man said pointing a finger at his chest. A chest that was scarred here and there, and still muscular for his advanced years. "I've seen a lot of things."

"You haven't seen everything," the rest of the crew said at once, pointing at Luffy who pouted a little and gave them all the finger.

"Bah, nothing you've seen would shock me!" Crocus replied, smirking at them all.

"You know, I think that was a challenge." So saying, Luffy turned away, taking up a cup of tea and pouring it over herself, changing back into his male form. *Is it a bad sign that I did the crossing the line ceremony and then actually entered the Grand Line in my girl form?* Luffy thought, then shuddered slightly. *Let's not think about it.*

While Crocus didn't seem to respond beyond a slight widening of the eyes, Miss Wednesday first gaped, then stared, her face flushing slightly. Though only part of that was in response to Luffy's actual transformation. The rest had to do with the girl-turned-boy's clothing. The loose black shirt that Luffy had been wearing was now skintight on him, showing off his abs and muscles remarkably well.

Shaking her head quickly, Miss Wednesday pushed past that initial response, pointing at the former redhead in shock. "What, what just happened!?" Then she suddenly scooted away from the tea set that had been set out, staring at it and Sanji and Makino who had been standing nearby. "Get that stuff away from me!"

Now it was Makino's turn to shake her head. "What is it with people and

always assuming it's the water that has the magic in it?"

Sanji was looking off into the distance before staring wistfully at his own teacup, a light blush visible on his cheeks. "I wish," he muttered, just loud enough for Luffy to hear it and chuckle.

"I have a sort of curse," Luffy explained, looking at the girl and the man who was merely looking on with the same jaundiced expression. "My theory about it is I must've met up with someone with a Devil Fruit power to change genders at a very young age. But ever since, cold water turns me into a woman, hot water back into a man."

"Which were you born as?" Miss Wednesday asked.

"A guy," Luffy replied flippantly.

"Then..." Miss Wednesday flushed, remembering how Luffy had caught her before and the view he must have had, then glared at the young man angrily, her face extraordinarily red.

A moment later, however, she seemed to gain control of herself, and her haughty look came back. Looking at that from nearby, Makino cocked her head, thoughtfully. For just a moment there the young woman in front of them with the somewhat provocative outfit had acted much younger than she had first appeared.

Ignoring the blue-haired girl and her apparently murderous companion, Nami looked at Crocus, impressed and interested at the old man's lack of a reaction. "Wait, Crocus. If you aren't reacting, does that mean you..." she paused, then frowned moving forward and waving a hand in front of his eyes. He didn't react at all to that either. "Oh, he fainted with his eyes open."

"Does that mean we can bury him?" Zoro asked, growling. "That damn joke of his pissed me off!"

"While I hate to agree with the Marimo, I have to say the idea has some appeal," Sanji groused, taking a long drag from his cigarette as he glared at Crocus. Nearby, Makino nodded too, glaring at the old man.

"I am missing something here," Luffy mused shaking his head. "Anyways, just dunk him back into the green goop. That'll wake him up, I guess."

Sanji and Zoro quickly grabbed a leg each and dunked the old man head first over the side of the ship, a sign of solidarity between the two that made Luffy's eyes widen slightly. An instant later they pulled him back aboard, coughing and gasping.

"All right," Luffy said quickly, clapping his hands. "A quick recap. I've got a curse which was probably given to me by a Devil Fruit user when I was a baby. I, I change into a girl when I am splashed with cold water, but hot water changes me back



into a man, which is the gender I was born as. I would rather you keep it to yourselves, and if you don't I will hunt you down, understand?"

"It's a full body change?" Crocus asked, looking a little interested now that he had gotten over his shock. "I've heard of a Devil Fruit that can do that kind of thing, but not instill the actual change into the body of the victim to be affected later with the application of water."

Luffy nodded, lying through his teeth even as he swore vengeance on Urd once more. "Yeah, I have no idea about the water thing either."

"Now are you willing to answer our questions and get us out of here?" Makino asked, gesturing over the side of the ship. "This gunk is already destroying our paint job fair enough, but I don't want to see what it will eventually do to our actual hull."

The older man looked at the still unconscious Mr. 9, and at Miss Wednesday, who was glaring at him now, as well as at the rest of the pirate crew. "They've been after Laboon for a few days now. They want to kill it for its meat for their island, which apparently is having a bit of a famine."

"I would have thought there would be easier ways to gather food than kill a gigantic whale," Makino murmured, but shrugged her shoulders. "Still, to each their own. They are whale hunters then?"

Zoro was frowning, shaking his head. "Killing it from the inside like that, that's a bit much isn't it?"

"It's the only way to go about it, just like it's the only way for me to treat his injuries sometimes," Crocus said with a shrug. "Laboon is simply too big. And if they attacked him from the outside, he'd retaliate."

"That, at least, makes some sense," Luffy said, looking at the two before looking back over at Crocus. "Wait, did you say 'treat'? Does that mean you're a doctor?"

That would be me, boy. Dr. Crocus, for going on fifty years now. I've been looking after..." Crocus broke off as a shuddering went through the whale, and he shook his head irritably. "Dammit, Laboon, not again!"

"What's it doing?" Luffy asked, even as Crocus turned aside, leaping over the side onto his small ship.

Crocus shouted over his shoulder as he entered his house. "He's attacking the Red Line." A second later the ship-island moved to the side of the stomach, where there was a long ladder set into the wall.

The crew watched, no longer noticing Miss Wednesday or Mr. 9, since they were no threat at present. They didn't see Mr. 9 slowly waking up, with Miss

Wednesday's hand latching onto his mouth, keeping him quiet. She motioned to the five crewmen, then whispered into his ear. "We'll have to wait at least until these pirates leave. They seem more sympathetic towards Laboon than us."

"Very well, Miss Wednesday. We'll go over the side the instant they're out of the stomach, then," Mr. 9 replied in an equally quiet tone before closing his eyes, feigning unconsciousness once more.

Soon after Crocus disappeared from sight, the shuddering ceased, followed by the juices sloshing back and forth as the whale slowly surfaced.

The old man then returned, and Luffy cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting. "What did you do?"

"I just gave him an infusion of dopamine," the doctor replied calmly as he climbed down. "If I just let Laboon bang his head against the Red Line as often as he wanted, he'd kill himself in short order."

"There's a story there," Luffy murmured, while the man walked across a very neatly made walkway hidden against the background painting to a series of pulleys. Then Luffy watched in amused astonishment as the side of the stomach actually opened, showing a small, but very well-made tunnel out to the rest of the ocean.

With the three boys using oars, the ship turned quickly, making for the entrance, and moments later they were outside, dropping anchor next to the lighthouse Luffy had used earlier. Crocus pulled his own ship up next to theirs, where it was very obviously wallowing in the water violently from side to side even from the minor motions of the ocean in this area.

"Definitely not a seaworthy vessel," Nami said, looking at it. "The construction's pretty incredible though, now that I think about it. Did you do that yourself?" she asked, looking over at the old man.

"No, I got that done for me specially by a carpenter from the Galley-la company of Water Seven," Crocus explained. "I'm a good doctor, and a decent miner, but not a ship designer."

Makino frowned thoughtfully, trying to remember where she had heard that name, before snapping her fingers. "That's one of the islands that specializes in shipbuilding. In fact, isn't that the island where the Oro Jackson was built?"

"It was," Luffy said with a nod before Crocus could answer. "At least, that's what Shanks told me once."

"Oh?" Crocus asked, cocking his head. "You know that youngster Shanks?"

"Youngster?" Luffy laughed. "Yeah, I know him, I suppose. Though if you call him that to his face, old man, I would really laugh."

"He might've made something of himself since, but I'll always remember him as a young whipper-snapper of a cabin boy, always palling around with that red-nosed punk" Crocus said, grinning.

"I'm just going to ignore that," Nami muttered, shaking her head with Sanji and Zoro both nodding in unison. The idea of anyone calling one of the Yonkou a whipper-snapper was one they didn't want to contemplate, even if it might have been true in the distant past. "But what's the story with the whale?"

"Oh, and do you have any paint around? We really should do something about the ship." Makino interjected.

"After we repair it," Luffy said dolefully. "We were able to dodge smashing headfirst into Laboon, but that doesn't mean we didn't get out of that entirely unscathed."

Crocus nodded his head towards the lighthouse. "Lots of paint and other stuff in there. If you want to paint your ship you're welcome, consider it my thanks for helping me deal with those two."

Luffy nodded, taking a glance to the side only to discover that their two erstwhile prisoners were gone. "Note to self: always tie prisoners up in the future."

The others turned and frowned, as they too noticed the two prisoners were currently gone. "That's not good," Makino murmured irritably. "Can anyone spot them?"

The others looked around, with Zoro going so far as to search the ship, only to not find them. Luffy in turn climbed to the crow's nest to look around but they were either gone or hidden out of sight.

Crocus shook his head. "It doesn't matter. They aren't inside the whale any longer, and I can block up the entrances for a few days, which means their chances of killing Laboon are gone. If they come back, I'll deal with them."

Makino jumped off the ship heading towards the lighthouse, while Sanji continued to put lunch together. Nami talked to Crocus for a while as Luffy and Zoro surveyed the damage. The paint had been seared off by the whale's gastric juices, and the entire port side of the ship had been ripped and torn slightly. But while a few of the planks had been warped or pushed in on the cannon deck, there was no damage below the waterline. The cannons on that side, however, had taken the brunt of the damage, with half of them becoming warped and twisted, or even flattened during the impact.

Luffy surveyed the damage and decided which of the cannons were , setting them aside outside the lighthouse. Crocus could do with them whatever he wanted.

The cannon port holes were also warped and twisted, or simply blocked in places, and clearing them up took several hours. The others chipped in at that point, leaving Crocus to eat his fill of the food Sanji had prepared as they worked. Luffy even turned it into a teaching moment, showing them how he could use his hands rather than a hammer, ordering Sanji and Zoro to either do the same, or come up with an equivalent.

The swordsman used his hands, his palm in particular able to take the punishment, but Sanji instead used his feet, his heavy, reinforced shoes easily up to the task. Either was fine by Luffy, and he showed them several other tricks and tools of the carpenter's trade. He didn't know much about building ships, but he could certainly repair one well enough to get by.

For their part, Nami and Makino were busy fetching things, or in Makino's case fetching things and occasionally helping slam nails in. They also worked on moving around the cannons inside the ship, after testing the cannon runs and realizing that most of them hadn't been damaged.

The final product was somewhat lopsided. One side of the ship would now have a broadside of only ten, the other half would have eight. For a schooner rig this size that was less than most. It wasn't a horrendous deficit, but it wasn't good either. Despite that, Luffy was happy with their progress, and said, "If we ever get into a ship to ship action again, myself and Zoro can be on defense, while Sanji handles the cannons and Nami and Makino steer the ship.

"We'll need to figure out a way for all of them to be fired at once, rather than be running down the line doing all the work one cannon at a time," Sanji murmured, taking a pull on his cigarette as he stared at it. "There's a reason each gun is supposed to have a crew of at least two, most times three. But I'll agree that's a decent idea, given what you can do with your Rankyaku attack and what the shitty Marimo is training himself to do against cannonballs themselves."

With the repairs done, Makino roped everyone into doing a simple splash and dash paint job on the hull, literally. She had them all hurl the dark blue and deep yellow paint all over the hull of the ship, and she and Nami went around spreading it out as much as possible. The final product didn't look very good, but at least it didn't look like a marine ship anymore.

With that finally done, the crew sat down with Crocus at the dinner table Sanji had set out by the lighthouse and listened to the tale of Laboon.

"That's so sad," Nami said, staring up at the whale as it let out a wail, half its body out of the water as it screamed to the sky. "They just sailed off like that?"

"Either that, or they died," Crocus said with a sigh. "I sailed out after them for

a time, but I never found hide nor hair of them. Of course this is the Grand Line, so that doesn't mean much, but the most sensible idea is that they just gave up and sailed back to West Blue via the Calm Belt at some point, and forgot all about Laboon. But Laboon thinks they're in West Blue, waiting for him."

"I feel sad for him," Makino said with a sigh. "Losing your crew like that, or being left behind..."

Luffy frowned thoughtfully as he stared at the giant whale. "And he keeps attacking the Red Line for that reason?"

Crocus sighed sadly. "Indeed, you can see the scars. He thinks if he batters the Red Line down he can go home and find the Rumbar pirates. Eventually Laboon will kill himself if he continues. But he's starting to grow an immunity to my drugs, and..." Crocus stuttered to a halt as Luffy stood up from the table.

His eyes shadowed by his hat, Luffy leapt up into the air, using Geppo to quickly move to a point above the giant whale. "Hey, big guy!" he shouted.

The whale turned sideways slightly so it could stare at him with one eye. Then before anyone else can say anything, Luffy's fist glowed black for a second and he smashed it into the whale's nose. The whale shot backwards several hundred feet in the water before roaring and charging as everyone else stared.

Luffy dodged Laboon's charge, then had to let his Geppo fail for a moment to drop through the air below a tail sweep from the giant whale, who had surprisingly turned on a dime to bring his tail into play. Then he had to use it again, bouncing up over a headbutt that would've probably slammed him down into the Red Line. He punched out again, sending Laboon's upper body crashing back into the ocean with a splash that nearly capsized both of the ships anchored nearby and threw everyone on the small cleft of the lighthouse into the water.

"Hey shitty captain, what the hell are you up to!?" Sanji shouted, trying to grab at Nami and Makino to keep them safe. Makino, however, could swim like a fish, and Nami had a death's grip on one of the rocks, so they didn't need any help just yet. Although judging from her glare, Sanji realized Luffy might need some help if she got her hands on him.

The whale groggily shook his head and wailed loudly, rearing up again with a lot of fight still left in him.

But then Luffy grinned, giving the whale a thumbs up. "I'm strong, right?"

The whale paused in its attack, its battle noise shifting into a crooning question.

"If I'm strong enough to fight you like that, do you think I'm strong enough to

survive the Grand Line?"

Laboon calmed down further, looking at him questioningly even as it nodded.

Seeing that, Luffy smiled even wider, so wide his face looked almost deformed by the expression. "Good! Then how about this, Laboon: I will sail the Grand Line, beginning to end, and return here. When I arrive, you better be ready for a rematch, because if you can fight me on an even footing you and I can then head out into the Calm Belt and search for your friends, all right? But you better train yourself up to be a match for me! That means no more mindlessly bashing your head against the Red Line."

Those words brought a tear to the giant whale, which Nami had to smile at. The whale seemed to understand every word Luffy said, which was impossible of course. But if it worked then maybe Laboon would stop trying to kill himself against the Red Line. Even Sanji's anger at the waves caused by Luffy's attack faded, and Zoro chuckled with Makino, both of them shaking their heads at the in-your-face way Luffy dealt with problems. Beside them Crocus just watched, astonished and slowly smiling as he realized what Luffy was trying to do.

As they watched, Laboon began to tear up and let loose a loud booming call, louder than any they had heard yet from the giant whale, as it nodded in the water.

**OOOOOOO**

Several leagues distant out in the ocean, Miss Wednesday coughed, shaking her head and helping to right the small boat she and Mr. 9 had left anchored nearby to a tiny rock jutting out of the sea. "What was all that about?" she muttered.

Beside her Mr. 9 pulled out a spyglass, peering through it at the activities in the distance. "I have no idea, but now that green haired woman is helping the young man in the straw hat draw something on the whale. What is that about?"

"It doesn't matter," Miss Wednesday said disconsolately, leaning back into the small rat rowboat now, shaking her head and making no mention of Luffy's curse. There was no point, and if they ever saw it in action again she would want to watch her partner's reaction anyway. "We failed, and Whiskey Peak is going to have to figure out another means of gathering food."

"Don't say that!" Mr. 9 said, frantically shushing her as he set the spyglass down, staring around them worriedly. "You know what the organization does to those who..." He stared up into the sky, his face paling slightly. "Oh no! How did they learn about it already!"

Miss Wednesday turned and stared too. "The Unluckies!"

In the sky above them was a vulture wearing aviator goggles carrying an otter in a bomber jacket who in turn was carrying a bomb. At the sight both agents waved their hands frantically. "Wait!" she shouted. "We didn't!"

"Give us another chance!" Mr. 9 shouted.

But the two came on swiftly and dropped the bomb a second later right over the small ship. Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9 dove into the ocean to either side avoiding the explosion, though both of them had trouble keeping afloat afterward from the waves it caused.

OOOOOOO

Luffy looked up from where he was finishing painting Laboon's nose. "I think I just found our wayward attackers. Hold on a sec," he said handing his paintbrush over to Makino, who gleefully took it, and began to swiftly correct the pirate mark Luffy had been trying to draw on Laboon.

Moments later Luffy returned with both the would be whale killers, dropping them down on the island. "So you two were still around," Zoro grunted from where he was moving wrecked cannons around at Crocus's command, shaking his head.

"Ah milady, we meet again!" Sanji said, bowing grandly and gently helping Miss Wednesday to her feet. "Come this way and have a seat while I get you something to warm you up."

"Ara, thank you very much," Miss Wednesday said demurely, squeezing his hand with hers as she glanced back at her partner.

"I, I deeply apologize for what we have done!" shouted Mr. 9, getting to his knees and bowing, his head smacking into the ground. "But please, find it in your hearts to forgive us! Please, we have no ship to return home with, yet if you help us return to Whiskey Peak we can see you are richly rewarded."

"Rewarded?" Nami said, clapping her hands together.

"Y, yes!" Mr. 9 said quickly. "We don't have much food, but we have a lot of information about the islands of the Grand Line, a Log Pose if you don't already have one, and quite a bit of money!"

Nami's eyes narrowed, and she leaned in staring suspiciously at Mr. 9. "How about some real details here, hmm? For instance, how are we going to get to Whiskey Peak? I understand that the Log Pose will choose one of the routes through the Grand Line randomly here on Reverse Mountain, so there's no way to be certain we'll choose

the route that leads to Whiskey Peak.”

“W, we have a Log Pose already set to Cactus Island. That’s the island our town is located on,” Mr. 9 stammered, feeling intimidated by the younger girl’s glare.

Luffy looked from Miss Wednesday to Mr. 9, then shrugged. “All right, we can’t just leave them here, after all, so why not?”

“Oy!” Nami shouted, glaring up at Luffy while Sanji smiled happily at the addition of another girl, completely ignoring Mr. 9’s presence. Zoro and Makino both shrugged, willing to go along with Luffy’s choice. “You can’t just decide something so serious so quickly!”

“Meh, it ain’t that important in the long run, and besides, I thought it said captain on my door somewhere?” Luffy replied, cocking an eyebrow at the ginger-haired girl.

“Hmmf. I’d be careful about taking them aboard, and at heading to Cactus Island at all. It’s only here at the start where you can truly choose your route. Only one route goes all the way to the end, to the lost island of Raftel, though only one crew has ever made it that far.” Crocus warned. “All the other routes will end in dead ends.

“I don’t care about that. We’re going to sail the whole world anyway, so if we have to start over, that’s fine by me.” Luffy replied with a dangerous smirk on his face.

“I see,” Crocus said, smiling at his answer, while around them the rest of the crew were also smiling, if a little wanly in Nami’s case.

“Don’t suppose you’d want to join us?” Luffy asked. “We still need a doctor after all.”

“Afraid not. I’m a little old for that kind of thing,” Crocus said with a smile. “I’ll just stay here and tend to my lighthouse and Laboon. Given how you told him to train, I have no doubt he’ll need a doctor nearby, though how he’ll train himself I’ve no idea.”

“Suit yourself,” Luffy said with a nod. “I think we’re all done here, soooo...” He shook the old man’s hand, and boarded the ship, quickly followed by their new passengers and the rest of the crew.

Crocus stared after them, a smile on his face as he stared into the sunset, despite not really seeing it. “Huh, that smile... Been many a year since I’ve seen the like. Is that the kind of crew you were hoping to see, Roger?”

**OOOOOOO**

Almost as soon as they were out of sight of the Red Line, the weather of the



Grand Line reared its head. Nami had been talking to Luffy in the reorganized captain's quarters, which had been turned into a day cabin for the crew as well as a dining room, about how she and Makino wanted their rooms set up in the short term. She looked up abruptly, staring out of a nearby porthole. With a gasp she raced out of the room out onto the deck. "We've been turned around!"

Looking down at the Log Pose, she ordered Sanji, who had been at the tiller, to turn them entirely around to face the correct direction again. Then she stared up into the sky feeling the thing that had first warned her something was wrong. "All hands on deck! I think we've got a storm coming!"

It wasn't just a storm with rain and lightning, though. It was a hail shower followed by a storm that made the one they faced coming out of Logue Town seem like a spring drizzle. This was followed rapidly by a near tornado and a whirlpool in the next several hours. It finished with a heavy snow, of all things. Each change in weather came from a different direction and gave Nami only a few seconds of warning before it hit, causing her to nearly tear out her hair at the madness of it all.

As morning began she was once more inside the main cabin, shaking her head as she stared out at Makino and Luffy. Makino was chuckling in sheer delight, holding out a hand and staring at the snow accumulating on it, seemingly not even feeling the cold. "I've never seen snow before," she said softly, "This is amazing!"

"Not as amazing as you, Makino-chan!" said Sanji, swooning past her from where he had begun to dump the snow over the side with a makeshift shovel.

Luffy laughed, chucking a snowball at Sanji before pulling her hair back into her ponytail. "I'd be loving this weather too if I could damn well stay male for a time."

"Ugh, this weather... It's like the entire world has gone mad!" Nami groaned turning away from the crazies that were her crew. "And here I thought it was only my band of morons who were so insane."

"And you call yourself a navigator?" Miss Wednesday said from where she was curled up around a hot cup of tea at the table, scoffing at Nami. "This is how it is on the Grand Line."

"I'm cold," Mr. 9 said, shuddering in place.

Suddenly Nami grabbed took them both by the shoulders, her nails digging in. They both froze at the look at her face as she pulled them out of their chairs. "What the hell do you think you two are doing?" she said in a decidedly calm voice. "Get to work, you freeloaders!" she roared, hurling them forward.

Then she glared at Zoro who was asleep, leaning against the mainmast. "What the hell! He slept through that hail!"

Luffy laughed. "The man likes his sleep, I guess."

Nami would have replied in an almost certainly violent manner, but just then the weather changed once more, and she had to shout out orders again.

A day later, Ranma cracked her neck once, then twice, stretching her hands above her for a moment, then glaring down at her small hands. She hadn't been able to stay in her male form for more than a few minutes at a time since leaving the lighthouse. It had gotten to the point where she was just irritated by the entire thing to even try. *Damnit, I thought the water attraction part of the curse might not have carried over, but with this weather that doesn't really matter does it? Still, it's been an hour since the last storm. Maybe I could chance it now?*

She looked over at Nami, who was standing by the railing, looking down at the water, then up at the sky, and then to the Log Pose on her wrist. She nodded in satisfaction, and turned to look up at Luffy smirking at the redhead. "I think we're getting close to this Whiskey Peak place. Crocus said that it was a summer island right? Certainly matches the weather we're getting now."

"Good," Luffy said with feeling. "I'd like to change into my regular body and actually stay that way for a time!"

"Poor baby," Nami cooed then squeaked as Luffy slapped her on the ass.

"That's no way to talk to your captain, Nami!" Luffy laughed as Nami turned, retribution in her eyes. But Luffy leaped away quickly, landing up in the crow's nest with a single bound. "Toss me the spyglass."

Nami remained glaring at him for a moment before hurling the telescope at Luffy's head as hard as she could.

It wasn't hard enough, and it fell short, but Luffy leaned out, hooking one foot around a rope and flip herself down like a master acrobat before righting herself quickly. "You throw like a girl!"

Below Luffy, Nami suddenly smirked, pulling at her shirt slightly to make it even tighter around her chest as she stared up at the other girl. "I would've thought that would be obvious!"

Luffy rolled her eyes, but took in the view for a moment, her eyes raking up and down Nami's body before turning back forwards. Nami was an interesting character sometimes; flirty occasionally, then aloof and standoffish at others. It was as if she was uncertain as to which was her natural personality now that she didn't have to fool people all the time. *Now if she could only get over her scaredy-furry demon tendencies and her bossiness outside of navigation and such that'd be a huge step forward.*

An instant later Luffy raised her voice. "Land ho! Giant cactus things on the horizon!"

Nami scaled the mainmast quickly, pulling herself into the crow's nest next to Luffy and grabbing the telescope from her. "Rude," the redhead muttered, shaking her head and moving backwards to give Nami some room.

In reply Nami pushed the redhead's shoulder with one hand, then looked forward through the spyglass. Frowning, she nodded after a moment. "It looks as if the island has a central waterway leading into a small cove. I can't make out if it's an actual cove, an inlet, or a stream leading out from the interior of the island however."

"You want to head for that waterway?" Luffy asked, looking at her.

Nami nodded, and Luffy leaped down, heading to Makino who was at the tiller as Nami began to shout orders. Stopping for a moment by the mainmast, she lashed out with a light kick at her first mate, who was still sleeping there despite having been covered by snow, then hit by hail and rain at different points of the last two days. "Wake up, you lazy ass!!!"

Zoro looked up at the redhead, shaking his head. "Damnit, between you and the others I haven't gotten a wink of sleep!"

Sanji was nearby, and in reply to this bit of delusion he lashed out with a kick that nearly took Zoro's head off, his foot slamming into the mainmast with enough force to rattle Nami up in the crow's nest. "I dare you to repeat that you shitty national treasure!"

"Sanji! Don't hurt the ship!" Nami shouted down at him.

"I apologize Nami-chan," Sanji said, throwing his arms out grandly and bowing quickly as Luffy held Zoro in a headlock, grinning as he attempted to get free to kill their chef. "But this shitty bastard has been sleeping here since we left the lighthouse, not lifting a single finger to help us despite all that weather we ran into!"

"I heard him, but kill Zoro later. We have work to do!" With that Nami began once again to give out orders as to how she wanted the sails turned.

But Luffy had already anticipated that, staring ahead of them towards the looming island and turning the tiller in that direction as Makino and Sanji saw to the sails.

As they came closer, mist began to come up off of the ocean where it hit the island on either side of them and in front where the ocean entered the stream. Zoro's eyes narrowed, and he looked around. "Where are our two passengers?"

Makino quickly entered the recently redesigned captain's quarter's now mess hall and general day room. The two semi-prisoners were there, both of them sleeping

on piles of spare mattresses. Makino woke them up somewhat gently, lightly kicking Mr. 9's head and gently shaking Miss Wednesday's foot.

She watched interestedly as the girl woke up, her eyes narrowed in speculation. The girl yawned, stretching lightly in place then seemed to freeze, and her face changed back into the semi-aloof, semi-condescending look she seemed to always wear. *So that isn't her real face. Interesting.* "We're here," she said before either of them could speak. "Come on."

The two followed her out onto the deck, which was now completely enveloped in fog. "Is this normal?" Luffy asked, her voice coming from one side, but the redhead was simply a shadow in the mist at the moment.

Mr. 9 turned in that direction, both his hands flung out ahead of him, feeling out his way as he spoke. He had nearly fainted the first time he had seen Luffy change, but it had quickly become commonplace over the short voyage. "Yes, it's always misty here in the mornings and the afternoon. It's a summer island, you see, and the rocks at the edge seemed to gather heat quickly." His hands found something and he squeezed it automatically.

A kick to his midriff sent Mr. 9 stumbling backwards a second later. "Hands off!" Luffy's voice growled at him. "That was all I needed to know. Makino, take the tiller would you? Sanji, up here with me and Zoro!"

"Just in case they're unfriendly?" Zoro said, one hand caressing his sword hilt.

"We are flying a pirate flag at the moment despite me still being in this form, dammit!" Luffy growled, shaking her head. "I'm afraid the whole bounty hunter alter ego has sort of run its course if I can't stay in my male form long enough to separate the two. So we should prepare for the worst."

Sanji blushed slightly, looking away. Over the past few hours he'd been able to blissfully forget that Luffy was really a man with a weird curse, and had a lot of fun looking at the redhead occasionally too.

Next to him Luffy growled, knowing what Sanji would've said if he had the temerity to do so, but Zoro simply shrugged. "We can try it at some point I guess. I don't think those two are going to tell anyone about it. And that name of Mr. 9's, something about that's bugging me..."

Luffy turned to look at him quizzically, but she noticed that the fog was dissipating in front of her. They came out into a small port, where three other ships were docked at present. Two of them were in various states of disrepair, and the other one had seemingly sunk where it was. The wharf and the docks were in good shape, however.

Both the wharf, the docks, and the other two ships were lined with people at present, all cheering and shouting lustily as they waved flags in the air. There were children, men, women, and a few nuns, of all things, all cheering loudly and waving signs or play toy swords. Those signs said 'we heart Pirates', and other things of that nature.

Sanji ate up the attention, blowing kisses at the pretty women among the crowd, while Nami, who had jumped down from the crow's nest a moment ago, exchanged a glance with Zoro. "Honey trap?"

"What's that?" Zoro asked.

Nami shook her head while Luffy rolled her eyes. "Never mind. Those two prisoners of ours just dove off the side for some reason," Nami reported, shaking her head at the idea. "You'd think they would at least stay with us until we are docked seeing as this was supposedly their home port, after all."

Luffy shrugged her shoulders, then looked at Makino. She was staring over the side thoughtfully, but shook her head and turned back before Luffy could ask her what was wrong.

At the front of the crowd was what looked like an official of some sort, a tall, saturnine man with blond hair done up in long ringlets falling to his shoulders, wearing a uniform that looked like a butler's outfit almost. "Maa, Maa, Maa, ahem Hello to you, brave adventures of the sea! Welcome...Maa, Maa, Maa, to Whiskey Peak! I am Mr. 8, the mayor of this town. Maa...we love pirates here, so please, take advantage of our hospitality! We have a meal prepared, as well as a drinking contest complete with prizes for those pirates who have dared to come here, their first stop on their new adventure in the Grand Line."

Unhesitatingly, Sanji leaped over the side as soon as the ship was tied to the wharf. He headed straight towards a crop of the local ladies. Surprisingly, Nami followed quickly, rubbing her hands together. "Money, money, money...money!"

"You had me at booze!" Zoro laughed, following quickly.

Makino followed after the rest, determined to ask some questions about the next few islands, but her thoughts about this island and their welcome remained hidden for now. *And on top of that I still have some questions about Miss Wednesday and Mr. 9, but this group seems nice enough. A little too nice, really, but I can't see any of them being a threat to us either. Best keep up my guard, but play along for now.*

She turned back as she noticed that Luffy wasn't following them all. "Luffy, aren't you coming?"

"Nah, I am going to rest here for a bit," Luffy replied with a shake of her head.

"I'd like some time to myself, you know." She mimed pouring something over her head and then sleeping. Nami laughed as did the others, but she didn't argue, and Luffy turned away from the rail, entering the ship quickly.

None of them noticed a quick glance being exchanged between Mr. 8 and a few of the others, who peeled off as Mr. 8 turned away to lead the pirates deeper into the town.

A moment later Luffy was again in his male form. Sighing with relief, he laid out on one of the beds in the mess close enough to get out and about quickly, but alone for the moment as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

**OOOOOOO**

Several hours later, night had fallen. Six men moved silently over the guardrail of the former marine schooner. Communicating with gestures, they moved towards the entrance of the captain's quarters. One of them began to oil the hinges of the door, while the others pulled out well-oiled swords and daggers. A second later they opened the door and made their way quickly over to the sleeping Luffy.

They paused then, staring at one another. "Search the boat for the redhead. This one is their captain. He must have been sleeping when they arrived, but it's best to take them both at the same time."

Searching the boat didn't take long, and they all gathered once again, confused, but knowing they had only the one target here. They reported back quickly, but were told to take out the captain despite the redhead still being missing. Despite not being the one they had originally been searching for, it would be enough.

Three of them stood by the bed, weapons raised, while the others stood back, watching just in case. As one, the three by the bed stabbed down, only to watch as Ranma rolled aside. They halted, staring at him, then breathed in relief as he let out a snore. "He's still sleeping," whispered one of the men to another. "Let's try that again."

They did so, but each time, Luffy moved aside. They became more reckless, stabbing wildly, and suddenly Luffy began to retaliate, kicking out hard enough to send one flying back out onto the deck through the broken door. Another had his sword grabbed by the blade. He was pulled down into a forearm that caught him in the throat before being dumped to the side of the pile of mattresses.

The last of the three originally by the bed let loose a squawk as another blow took him below the belt, and he fell whimpering.

The last two looked on in shock, then their eyes widened still further as Luffy let loose another snore. "What the hell, he's still asleep!"

"Yeah, but he has to be sensing our attack somehow. A lot of fighters can anticipate stuff like that. Never heard of one able to do it while asleep though. Still, I bet he can't avoid musket balls!" the last man said, pulling out a pistol.

The other man did the same, and they both aimed at the figure on the boat. They fired, but Luffy quickly rolled off the bed onto the bodies of the two injured attackers by the bed, rolling over them. Then the one who had taken a shot to the balls found himself grabbed by his head and hurled bodily into his last two fellows. His head crashed into the head of one of them, while his steel-reinforced boot found the head of the other. All of them fell senseless to the floor, and Luffy continued to snore on.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, the nun who had been the second to last contestant stared across at Nami from within her own arms as the younger girl's head thumped into the table at last. The black-skinned woman waited hardly daring to breathe for a few moments before looking around at the other pirates. Then she quickly stood up, and moved outside towards Mr. 8. "Good grief," she said, pulling off the wimple on her head and revealing short cropped purple hair and a thick heavysset face and neck. "Those pirates can sure party! Are we sure that this was even necessary?"

"Maa, Maa, Maa... You would not be saying that if you had actually taken a look at their bounties," said Mr. 8 coolly. "Your failure is understandable if you ran into foes of this nature!" he said in a louder voice, turning to stare up at a nearby rooftop.

Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday appeared there, jumping down quickly. "Their captain dealt with us so easily we didn't dare fight them all. Hopefully bringing them here and getting their bounties will be enough to get the Unluckies' verdict against us rescinded," Mr. 9 said worriedly.

"It should be," Mr. 8 said judiciously. "Don't worry...Maa, Maa...I will put in a good word for you."

"What are their bounties?" the nun asked. "And what about their captain?"

"Never fear, Ms. Monday," said Mr. 8, shaking his head. "The captain and the redhead both stayed aboard their ship. I used Carue to keep an eye on their ship until a few moments ago, but the redhead is still nowhere to be found. Their captain,

however, was reported as still sleeping. Our men will deal with him quickly.”

A large duck appeared around the bend of the alleyway, moving quickly to Miss Wednesday's side, and she patted it absentmindedly. “Good, that makes it somewhat simpler. And don't bother searching for the redhead, their captain and the redhead are one and the same.”

“What?” both Mr. 8 and Ms. Monday said in unison, frowning at the other two.

“You wouldn't believe us,” both Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday said as one, shaking their heads. “Let's just put it down to a very strange and unusual Devil Fruit which doesn't seem to have any combat application.”

The other named agents shrugged their shoulders, and then turned back to Mr. 8 who had yet to answer his partner's questions. At their looks, Mr. 8 unveiled the bounties on the Straw Hat crew, causing many a gasp among the bounty hunters which had slowly surrounded them.

One or more of them shouted aloud, “We're rich!”

Another one laughed loudly. “Screw our food problems. We could take this money and live like kings, all of us!”

Mr. 9 scoffed, pointing one of his bats at the one who had spoken. “Oh really, and what do you think Mr. 0 would think about that? You know the penalty for leaving the organization.”

A voice interrupted them at that point. “Oh really. So I was right, that name did ring a bell. Still, I would prefer that you lot stay quiet. The rest of my crew seems to have had a hard time of it lately and I wouldn't want to wake them up.”

All of the bounty hunters, and there were around 100 or so all gathered together around the bar, turned and stared. On top of one of the larger buildings nearby sat Zoro, with a final bottle of beer in one hand as he stared down at them smirking.

“How are you still awake?!” Mr. 8 shouted, getting over his surprise quickly.

“The love cook is about the only one on this crew whose likely to take a welcome like that at face value. Well, him and Luffy maybe. Luffy just wouldn't care, because none of you are a threat to her, him, whatever he is at the moment. But the others of us knew something was up, at least.”

“Oh?” said Miss Wednesday in a haughty tone, glaring up at him. “Then where are the other two?”

“They're around someplace, I imagine. Probably stealing your dry in Nami's case. Makino, she's not a fighter by preference. Maybe she really did decide to take a



nap, who knows? In any event, don't you think you have enough trouble on hand... Baroque Works?"

Mr. 8 and the other agents gasped. "Maa, ma...cough, cough...maa, maa. How, how do you know that name?!" Mr. 8 stuttered.

"It happened a few years ago. Someone from Baroque Works named Mr. 12 or something tried to recruit me. I didn't agree, of course. And when he tried to kill me, I dealt with him," Zoro said with a shrug.

"That means that if we deal with you at least one of us might be a promoted!" shouted a swordsman who had gotten up onto the same roof as Zoro. Racing forward he swung his blade down hard. Zoro ducked his head, his hand flashing out and catching the man's forearm, hurling the other man over the side of the rooftop.

"That's assuming you're tough enough to take my head," Zoro said as he got to his feet. Draining his bottle of booze he hurled it at the face of a man who just came up onto the roof smashing him backwards down the stairwell. "I've been meaning to give my new swords a workout. I didn't get much of one in Logue Town against the marines, considering that we didn't want to kill any of them. But bounty hunters are fair game, so you mind being part of my training for the night?"

"Such arrogance! Does he not know how many of us there are?!" said Mr. 9.

"Maa, Maa...surround him!" shouted Mr. 8. "Don't let him get away or link up with his other crewmen! Charge!"

With that, many of the bounty hunters with guns opened fire, but Zoro was gone. They all gasped, and then screams abounded from nearby as Zoro landed in among the bounty hunters, cutting and hacking each and every way.

Despite what he had said, Zoro wasn't the sort who killed weaklings like this, and as he slid out of one of Tatsumaki he grunted irritably pulling at one of his swords as if it was trying to escape his grip. "Such bloodlust! I figured you'd be a problem child, Sandai Kitetsu, but to this extent? We're going to have to have a long talk about which of us is the one in charge here!"

Mr. 9 attacked him then, his metal bat elongating into to a chain trying to grab one of Zoro's arms like he had done to Luffy while in Laboon's stomach. "Now, Mr. 8!"

Mr. 8 nodded and pulled something in his hair, and suddenly guns appeared in each of the curls. "Igarappa!"

The guns went off with all the impact of a shotgun blast, though with a longer range. But Zoro pulled, and Mr. 9 flew into Mr. 8, spoiling his aim for a moment, then Zoro charged forward, cutting and hacking. Now he was in among more of the bounty hunters, stopping Mr. 8 from firing again. Miss Wednesday also charged forward, only

to be stopped from closing when her 'charge', a giant duck, suddenly wheeled away and ran off, the blue-haired girl shouting angrily at it.

With a roar, Ms. Monday closed in, a huge cob of wood in her hands which she used as a battering ram. Zoro turned from dealing with a dozen other bounty hunters to grit his teeth as the tree-trunk slammed into Zoro's chest, hurling him up onto a roof. But Zoro rolled with it, looking down his chest and flicking away a bit so dirt. "If that's the best they've got, this is going to be damn boring." His Tekkai training wasn't perfect, but even without calling on the technique his body was tough as all hell.

Zoro's musing was interrupted by a knife coming toward his back. Faster than the attacker could follow Zoro turned, disarming the little brat who had just tried to attack him, growling at the kid.

"Oh Kami, pray don't hurt him! He is but a lost soul!" One of the sisters from the earlier party charged forward, grabbing the boy and pulling him away from Zoro holding up a rosary with a cross in front of her.

"I don't hurt anyone who doesn't attack me." Zoro rolled his eyes, turning away.

As he did the middle of the cross opened when the nun pulled at the rosary which was attached to it. Smoke billowed, and both she and the child charged forward now holding short swords. A series of thumps sounded in the middle of the smoke, and Zoro shook his head as he walked out, before leaping onto another roof. Behind him the smoke faded, revealing the two knocked out bodies. "That was just sad!"

One of Mr. 9's bats again whirled towards Zoro in chain form as he was once more engaged with several other hunters, hurling them aside with various injuries. But none of them had been slain just yet. To Zoro, this scum wasn't worth killing. The bat-chains looped around one of Zoro's feet, pulling him to the ground, and Ms. Monday charged. Grabbing Zoro by the back of the head hard, she slammed him down face-first into the top of the roof with such strength that she would have broken any normal man's skull.

Nearby, Mr. 8 smiled grimly. "It's over. No one can match Ms. Monday in strength."

A second later he was surprised to hear a woman crying out in pain. He turned back quickly only to watch in shock as Zoro stood up almost unharmed, his own hand gripping Ms. Monday's head as hers had been a moment before.

"If this is the best Baroque Works can offer, then I was right to turn them down!" With that, Zoro hurled Ms. Monday like a sack of wheat towards Mr. 9,

catching him in the center of his chest and hurling them both off the roof down into an alleyway.

“Miss Wednesday! Try your dance!” Mr. 8 ordered, as he tried to fire at Zoro once again, only to miss as Zoro leaped down into an alleyway, charging into another group of bounty hunters. Mr. 8 could only count around forty bounty hunters within sight still taking part in the fight, and he shook his head in shock as that number decreased by three more as he waited for another shot. *One swordsman is doing all of this?!* The next instant he found himself smashed through a wall from the flat of one of the blades Zoro held.

“Of course!” Miss Wednesday shouted, suddenly smirking, her shock disappearing. “No matter how strong his body is, he is still a man, and will fall to my dance! Carue, get me in front of him!”

The duck saluted, and Miss Wednesday got on its back, racing forward. A second later, Miss Wednesday slid off Carue to stand in front of Zoro. “Look at me, Mr. Bushido!”

Zoro turned, cocking his head at the girl, who he had believed to be the least combat capable of the bounty hunters. Before he could say anything, however, she began to move her hips and sway from side to side, the concentric circles of her outfit moving hypnotically. “Witness my Miwaku no Memaii Dansu (Captivating Dizzying Dance)!”

The sight of the girl’s body moving this way and that, covered by the hypnotizing colors, did stall Zoro for a brief second, but then Carue squawked, slamming his head into Miss Wednesday, knocking her aside. There was a ‘Tink!’ sound as a tiny rock flew through the space her head had previously occupied.

“None of that please, you’re giving women a bad name with moves like that,” Makino said as she came out from between two of the buildings. She rolled her eyes at the younger girl. “Besides, you’re doing it wrong. You need some music or perhaps a perfume to give that kind of move another angle of attack.”

“I had thought about it, but the first time I tried to fight someone while carrying perfume bottles, they fell out of my coat, and the second time the smell got into my clothing **so** badly,” Miss Wednesday replied, answering Makino’s calm tone with her own as if they weren’t actually fighting one another.

Then she shook her head and attacked the other woman, only to be swiftly disarmed and flipped to slam back first into the ground as around them the fight continued. “Why don’t you just lay there for a bit, hmm? I have some questions for you, my dear. Zoro, go have fun. We women need to have a talk.”

Knowing that the green-haired woman could handle herself, Zoro let the fight take him away through the alleyways of the battle for a bit, smirking over his shoulder for just a second before he was out of sight. "They said something about sending a few people to take care of Luffy. Is that going to be an issue?"

"No," Makino said blankly, shaking her head. "That is, not for us if they attacked Luffy while he was asleep."

Vivi stared up at the older woman, who she had discounted from the start as a non-threat, fading easily into the background aboard the schooner. But given the ease with which she had just dealt with Miss Wednesday, that was not the case. As Zoro moved off, Makino looked down at Vivi, cocking her head to one side, but when she spoke it sounded as if she was just striking up a conversation. "You know, we had originally decided to see if we could create an alter ego of Luffy's female form called Ranko that could act like a bounty hunter. I made up an entire outfit for her. I've always enjoyed dressing people up. I even helped him and his brothers years back with some of their schemes."

Her smile became sharper and her eyes bore into Miss Wednesday's suddenly. "So I have to wonder why you are wearing a disguise, and what exactly you're hiding?"

Nearby, Mr. 8 stiffened in the house whose wall he had shattered under a blow from Zoro. He turned quickly, leaping to his feet, and before Makino could do or say anything, shouted, "Igarappa!"

Makino wasn't as good at observation haki as she was at armor haki, and even after years of practice she couldn't hold armor haki for very long. Her body was very tough, though, and she could use Tekkai to a certain extent. That was what she did now, shouting, "Tekkai!" Even so, the shotgun blast slammed into her body, hurling her away from Miss Wednesday. She smashed back into the glass of a storefront, grunting in pain as she rolled in the debris for a moment.

When she pushed her way back out onto the street Makino was alone; the duck and the two agents were gone. She scowled, but then shrugged and moved back into the store, looking around. There would probably be time enough for her questions to be answered later.

Instead of retreating as was sensible, Mr. 8 decided to rally the other named agents, his own partner, and Mr. 9 to attack the swordsman yet again, not realizing that his attack on Makino hadn't actually finished her off. He gathered ten more bounty hunters with muskets and began to move around the fight still going on around Zoro, planning to ambush him. If they could pin him down, Mr. 8 felt, then they might be able to deal with the swordsman at range.

As they were doing this, there was an explosion in the distance. Mr. 8 turned in that direction, frowning, wondering what that had been, but deciding to put off looking into it for a few moments. Before he could think anything else, the store to one side of his current position was cut into several pieces, and he heard a shout of, "Thousand Yard slash!" The stone and wood of the building was sliced into hundreds of pieces and then hurled towards Mr. 8 and his ambushers.

An instant later, Zoro walked through the remains of the building, looking down at the one sword currently in his grip. "Hmm... Not quite there yet. There's definitely room for improvement. Glad I haven't really decided on a name for that attack just yet." He snorted, looking around at the battered and unconscious forms of the last few bounty hunters. "Even so, it was enough for these weaklings. Now I wonder where the booze is?" With that he wandered off, neither noticing nor worried that Mr. 8 and Mr. 9 at least were still awake, feigning unconsciousness among the rubble.

**OOOOOOO**

Luffy twitched at the distant sound of an explosion, yawning and cracking his neck as he got up from the pile of mattresses. "Wha," he yawned. "What was that?" he muttered, then frowned looking around at the number of unconscious strangers on the ground around him. "Where did you lot come from?"

Shrugging at not getting any answer, he grabbed two of them and began to drag them out of the room, deciding to get them off the boat before looking for answers.

**OOOOOOO**

When the swordsman was out of sight Mr. 8 and Mr. 9 turned to one another. Mr. 8 quickly moved to check on Miss Wednesday, while Ms. Monday groaned, shaking her head as she pushed out of the rubble. She was battered head to toe and bleeding in multiple places, but her durability was the best of the four of them. Miss Wednesday had the worst durability, though her speed and agility was by far the best of the four. She had even dodged lot of the bits of rubble, though one had caught her in shoulder hurling her to the side where she had decided to play dead just like the others.

"We, we need to come up with some kind of plan," Mr. 8 said, shaking his

head. "I, I refuse to fail our mission."

"And what mission would that be?"

Mr. 8 and the others turned to look at two individuals walking calmly through the wreckage of the town. After a moment, all of their eyes widened, some in shock, some in carefully hidden concern.

One of the newcomers was a man whose skin color was a few shades lighter than Ms. Monday's, with kinky black hair sticking out in every direction and dark sunglasses covering his eyes. He wore a long coat open at the chest to show a wide pink cravat. On one of its sides the coat had the number '5' enclosed in a box. At his belt he had a pistol.

Next to him walked a young woman looking somewhat younger than Makino, but older than Nami or Miss Wednesday. She had blonde hair showing below a mullet hat, and was wearing a short one piece dress with yellow lemons on a yellow background, gloves, matching boots, and large circular earrings to go with her green eyes. Over one shoulder she carried an open parasol.

"Mr. 5! Ms. Valentine!" shouted Mr. 9.

"Excellent...maa, maa...with you here we can easily defeat these pirates. The bounties on them will..." Mr. 8 said, only to be interrupted.

"Don't joke!" the man said, scoffing. "You think we've come out all this way to help you lot? Don't make me laugh."

Mr. 8 stiffened just slightly, as did Miss Wednesday. "What are you here for, then?"

"We're here on a mission. 'Someone's found out my secret,' the boss told us. Someone has actually infiltrated our organization trying to find out our secrets. The boss had discovered that then sent us out here to take care of the person. Isn't that right, your majesty?"

"I, I don't know what you're talking about. And besides, my wearing a crown is just an affectation. I'm not a real prince or king!" protested Mr. 8, waving his hands in front of him wildly.

"HAHAHA!" laughed Ms. Valentine. "It's not you we're talking about. No, there's real royalty here, isn't there, Princess Nefertiti Vivi?"

OOOOOOO

"Did you have fun, Zoro?"

Zoro turned from where he had just pulled a bottle of booze out of the rubble

of a storehouse to look at Nami and Makino, who had come out from one of the stores. Makino held a large bag over one shoulder, while Nami was growling something and kicking the rubble at her feet. Makino actually looked a little roughed up around the edges, her clothing torn here and there and her hair messed up, but otherwise she seemed unharmed. "Huh, so you're awake too, Nami?"

"As if that watered-down booze could ever knock me out!" Nami growled, shaking her head. "Besides, whoever heard of anyone welcoming pirates as openly as this island did? Though I'm surprised Luffy didn't join in at any point."

"That would've been overkill," Zoro said with a shrug. "Their teamwork sucked, and most of them were barely cannon fodder."

All three of them turned as a sudden explosion sounded in the distance, then turned back as Ranma arrived out of the air, landing lightly on her feet, wringing out her shirt and growling. She looked at three-fourths of her crew and waved her arms in the air angrily. "So here I am, minding my own business, removing some of the locals who tried to attack me in my sleep, when I hear a whistling noise. Before I can figure out what it was, I'm suddenly splashed with seawater as something slams into the ocean behind me and explodes! So here I am as a girl again."

The redhead sighed visibly, gathering herself. "Does anyone want to fill me in on what's been going on? I'd guess our welcome was really a trap, since obvious trap is obvious."

Zoro grinned, while Nami actually chuckled a little, coming out of her funk from not having found any loot. Makino just nodded before explaining what had happened. When she was done, Luffy frowned. "So is there any reason why our former guests are being attacked at present by two newcomers? I noticed their ship as I was taking out the trash, and saw Miss Wednesday running off while the other three are fighting the two newcomers. And losing badly, from what I saw."

At that, Makino scowled. "Can you lead us to them, Luffy? I had some questions I wanted that young lady to answer."

Shrugging her shoulders, Luffy did just that. They came upon the scene of the battle, though the two aggressors were nowhere in sight, possibly having chased after Miss Wednesday. The mayor, Mr. 8, was still conscious, surprisingly, crawling along the ground, unable to push himself to his feet. "N, no! I won't, I won't let them have the princess, not as long as I live!"

"Princess?" said four voices as one, and Igaram turned in their direction. Makino went on crouching by his side and pulled some medical wraps and disinfectant from her ki-expanded pouch. "What's this about Miss Wednesday being a princess? I

thought she was hiding something, but not that!"

"And if she's a princess, does that mean you can pay us to rescue her?" Nami interjected, holding up her fingers in the beli sign.

Luffy rolled her eyes, but said nothing as Mr. 8, after licking dry lips, nodded, giving them a brief overview of what had gone on, mentioning that Miss Wednesday and Mr. 8, whose name was Igaram, had infiltrated Baroque Works because it was doing something in their country of Alabasta. "The rest can wait for later, but for now, please, please save Vivi-sama!"

Looking around, Luffy nodded. "Zoro, you're the one that started this, ya want to go finish it?"

Nodding, Zoro raced off in the direction of the explosions as Makino chuckled, shaking her head. "Even he can't get lost following that racket, I suppose."

Luffy let her lips quirk for a moment before sitting down beside Igaram on a handy bit of rubble. "So, how about that longer story now?"

OOOOOOO

Vivi clasped Carue's unconscious form to her chest, staring down the street at Mr. 5, shock and horror in her face. "And so, this story ends," said the man, picking at his nose for a moment before flicking it at her. The thing arced through the air like it was an arrow, heading straight toward her.

Before it could impact Vivi, however, Zoro was there, leaping down from one of the nearby rooftops, slicing the booger in half with one of his blades. The two portions continued on their course to explode to either side of him, and he landed, only to stare at his sword, aghast. "Fuck me, I just sliced a **fucking** booger!"

Unfortunately for Mr. 5, Zoro was still holding Sandai Kitetsu after having used it in his long range attack earlier. Zoro could feel the blood lust of the sword rising to a crescendo, and a miasma of black and red made of fury and rage seemed to coruscate up the blade for a moment and into Zoro's mind.

Zoro held on to his sense of self, of course, beating back the sword's attempt to control him, but he still nodded. "We're in agreement then, this one has to die." At that the miasma dissipated, but the sword still shuddered in his hand like it was seeking blood.

"Who are you?" Mr. 5 asked, sneering. "Some pirate taken in by these shit stains?"

"If you were fighting them, why are you getting in our way now?" asked his



partner, Ms. Valentine. “Hahaha! If you wanted to live longer you should have just kept away from us. After all, we don’t have any business with you.”

“Mr. Bushido, wh, why...”

“My captain ordered me to save you,” Zoro said, simply looking down at Vivi before stepping towards the two newcomers. Once away from the princess, he pulled out a green bandana and tied it over his hair, pulling out both of his other blades. Wado Ichimonji’s hilt went into his mouth and he growled angrily. “Though you just gave me a reason to make this **real** personal!”

Ms. Valentine cackled again. “HAHAHAH! He’s talking like he actually has a chance against us! Coming from a newcomer to the Grand Line that’s just insulting! Let’s show him our teamwork, Mr. 5!”

“His arrogance is pissing me off too, Ms. Valentine!” said Mr. 5. He began to pick it his nose quickly with both hands, then flicked his fingers several times. “Nose bomb barrage!”

“Stay where you are,” Zoro ordered curtly over one shoulder before marching forward, his blades flashing. Each booger was intercepted and cut by a different blade, sending the explosions elsewhere easily as he advanced.

Thanks to his ongoing training, Zoro could feel the spirits of Wado and Yubashiri rouse themselves. The other swords weren’t nearly as bloodthirsty as Sandai, but even they began to react to this effrontery. *Don’t worry, they’ll be dealt with*, Zoro thought to them.

Scowling, Mr. 5 pulled out his pistol, which he hadn’t used yet. It was a special one from East Blue, a six shot pistol which he breathed into. Thanks to his Devil Fruit, Mr. Five was a bomb man, able to make any part of his body, even his breath, into an explosive. Once he breathed into it, he raised the pistol, firing all six shots quickly. At the same time Ms. Valentine jumped into the air, her parasol lifting her high into the air.

Zoro ducked, dodged, and even cut the air in front of him, slicing into the charged air, causing the strange ‘bullets’ to explode harmlessly. From above him Ms. Valentine’s form cascaded down, increasing her weight to more than a ton as she had earlier lightened her weight to that of a feather. “500 Kilo drop!”

To her shock, however, despite his concentration on Mr. 5, Zoro simply sidestepped the girl. The flat of Yubashiri, the least angry feeling of his swords, flashed out, slamming into her head, sending her unconscious to crash sideways with all of that weight into the wall of a nearby building.

“Ms. Valentine! You’ll pay for that!” At that Mr. 5 began to fire more rapidly,

but Zoro ducked and dodged. Mr. 5, realizing that the man was too fast for his long range attacks to deal with, gathered himself, lashing out with a kick as Zoro closed the range. “Bomb kick!”

“Oni Giri!” Zoro said, his tone calm for all that he was shouting as he launched into his attack. There was a moment of an explosion which twisted his body to one side when his blade intersected Mr. 5’s body, but it didn’t stop his attack. Then Zoro was behind Mr. 5, clicking one blade into his sheathe quickly as he pulled the bandana from his head. “That was for making me cut your damn boogers!”

Mr. 5 turned in place for a moment intending to attack the bastard quickly. But then he gasped in agony, one hand rising to his stomach, as suddenly blood spurted from a cut straight across his body. An instant later he fell back, his body cut nearly in two. Bomb man he might have been, but that didn’t give him any special durability against slashing attacks.

“So,” he said, moving back to the shocked Vivi and pulling her to her feet. “What’s this I hear about you being a princess?”

Moments later, the two of them were back with Igaram, and Zoro joined his crew as they listened to Vivi and Igaram explain. Makino was sympathetic, Zoro and Luffy interested, and Nami eager. Not eager to get involved in this trouble, though, no. She was eager because she was certain that a princess would be able to pay them a lot of money to help her here. Not having access to the majority of their savings was getting to Nami, and she wanted to take any chance she could to make some money.

“And who is this Mr. 0?” Luffy asked as the story wound down, still wet from her impromptu salt bath.

“N, No, don’t ask me that! You’ll be in too much danger if you learn that secret!” Vivi shouted, actually pushing herself away from the others.

“Then we won’t ask!” Nami said quickly, covering Luffy’s mouth with her hand and glaring at the other two. Zoro flinched most nicely under the power of her glare, but Makino simply cocked an eyebrow at the young girl as Nami went on. “We’ve already helped you, and we have nothing to gain by getting involved with whoever this is, especially if he’s so powerful as to bring together such a large organization.”

“Yes, thank you for all your help, but I can’t possibly ask you to put yourselves in danger for us. No matter how strong you are, you wouldn’t be a match for the Shichibukai Crocodile!” Vivi said, then gasped, her hands coming up to cover her mouth in shock at what she had just said.

Nami gaped, as did Makino, one hand rising to slap her forehead and slowly move down her face as she shook her head. For her part, however, Luffy smiled widely.

"One of the Shichibukai, did you hear that, Zoro?"

Zoro grinned at the redhead. "Not even a week on the Grand Line and we've already got a clue as to where one of them is?" He held out his hand, fist-bumping the redhead's as the two of them laughed.

"That's it!" Nami said, turning away. "Sorry, it was nice and all, Luffy, but there are some things I'm just not willing to do! And getting on the bad side of a Shichibukai is right up there on that list! Crocodile only knows about the Princess here. That means I can get out of here regardless of what you lot want to do!"

She turned away, only to stop and stare at Mr. 13 and his partner who had landed on some rubble behind her. The otter pulled out a series of sketches, one for each of the people there at the moment, and Nami actually clapped staring at her own likeness. "Wow! You're good!"

A second later, Nami came back to her senses, and tried to wing the pair with a rock as they flew off rapidly. "Dammit! You mean I can't even escape now?"

"And you," she said, roaring the words as she turned to Luffy. "Why couldn't you have caught them? Or cut them down with your Rankyaku!"

"What would be the point?" Luffy said with a shrug. "They already have our likenesses probably, given our bounty posters, though admittedly not yours, Nami. Besides, Vivi here needs help, and if that lets me test myself against a Shichibukai again, that's all I could want."

"God damn it, that's fine with you, but I don't want to GAH!"

Luffy interrupted Nami by tapping her on the forehead with enough force to rock her head back slightly. "Nami, I've told you before that you need to get over this whole 'flight instinct' of yours. You're on the crew of the future pirate King, what's a Shichibukai to that?"

Nami stared at Luffy, one hand rising to rub her forehead for a moment as she fell silent, pouting.

"Still," Luffy said, shaking her head. "We've obviously outworn our welcome here. I'd rather not stay in one place and let them bring all these Millions and Billions to bear on us. I'm going to head back to the ship. Nami, can you get Sanji? Zoro, see if Makino needs any help gathering whatever supplies she's found. Igaram, Vivi, is there anything you want to grab while we're here?"

"A few bits of clothing," Vivi said while Zoro and Makino walked off. She stared at Luffy for a few moments, shocked at the sheer certitude in the redhead's voice. "I'll... I'll just go and get them." She stopped for a moment by Nami. "Um, and I have some beli saved up, a couple hundred thousand, if that will make you feel better."

Nami looked at the other girl for a moment before sighing, shaking her head. "Thanks Vivi, but we'll have to see about that down the line. The captain has spoken, after all." Nami shook her head again and stomped off, still scared, but not so angry anymore.

"I cannot thank you enough for this," Igaram said as he too got up and moved off, leaving Luffy to turn and head towards the ship.

The group gathered once again at the ship moments later, and Nami actually laughed now, shaking her head. "How much you want to bet Luffy's back inside getting a warm shower or something again?"

"Can you blame him?" Zoro asked, looking from Nami to the battered form of Sanji, who she had literally been dragging through the town despite his protestations. Being the only one of the crew to really have been taken in by this deception, Nami thought some punishment was in order. Not only was it sad that Sanji was taken in at all, but if he could fall for a honey trap that easily it was a very bad sign for the future.

Nami was also still upset about how Luffy had dealt with her concerns. It was as if Luffy and Zoro and possibly even Sanji and Makino thought that they could get by with simply training as hard as they could and sheer willpower! She wasn't about to doubt their strength, but that didn't mean they had to go and look for fights, did it? Not when a bit of thought would allow them to avoid them instead.

"I will not be journeying with you," said Igaram as he stepped forward from a nearby ship, the ship that Mr. 5 and his partner must've used. "I will instead take Mr. 5's ship and act as a decoy."

Sanji shakily got to his feet, trying to bring a cigarette to his battered mouth only to stop and stare at the horror in front of him. Igaram was dressed up in the same kind of clothing that Vivi was wearing, complete with makeup, wig, and a fake bust. "GAHHH!" he shouted, racing forward to duck his head into the ocean by the wharf. "The horror, the horror!"

Nami gulped and said gamely, "Erm, are you are you sure that's necessary?"

"I believe it is. Mr. 5 might not be the only agent in the area, and you don't want to be attacked in the open ocean by the Millions or Billions," Igaram replied confidently, not noticing how Nami shuddered as his lipstick-stained mouth moved. "Do not worry, I will only wear this disguise for a few islands before leaving it behind and going on as myself. That should throw anyone off the trail."

"Ah, um okaaay..." Nami said, stammering a little as she looked over at Makino, who was glaring at the horror in front of them muttering under her breath. *Professional, or semi-professional anyway, anger, I suppose?* "We'll just be going,

then," she went on, pushing the other girl towards their ship. "We'll see you in Alabasta."

"Wait!" Vivi shouted, suddenly turning around. "Where's Carue?"

"You mean this thing?" Zoro said, pointing to the large duck that was standing beside him on the boat. "It was here when I got here."

"You've got to be kidding me!" said Vivi, smacking her forehead before jumping up onto the boat with the others.

"Let's just go," Nami said with a sigh. "I'll have you know, though, Vivi, that I'm going to be charging you as much as I can for this little enterprise!"

"After you clear it with the captain," Zoro said, grinning as he took the wind out of Nami's sails. "He didn't seem to think that we needed payment, after all."

Nami growled, but she and Vivi began to explain everything to Sanji as the two men began to first punt, then row the ship away from the dock. An instant later there was a massive explosion, and everyone turned to stare aghast as Igaram's ship exploded behind them.

"Igaram!" Vivi shouted, racing to the edge of the ship where she tried to throw herself over the rail, but Sanji had quickly grabbed her by the shoulder, his grip gentle but unyielding. "Let me go! Igaram!"

"If he was caught in that, he's gone," said Nami, before grabbing the other girl around the shoulders and pulling her into a hug. "All you can do is keep moving," she said seriously, setting her own worries and fears set aside at the moment.

Vivi sobbed against the other girl's chest for a moment before nodding and pushing herself away, dry-eyed. "You, you're right. Igaram would...he'd want that, wouldn't he?" With that, Vivi turned away from the sight of her friend and defender's fiery grave, moving over to cuddle with Carue near the mainmast as Nami shouted orders to the rest of the crew.

Even with Luffy still inside taking a shower, the crew was able to move the schooner quickly along towards the entrance to the cove. As they neared it, a voice said, "Watch out for those rocks on the portside."

"Don't worry, I've already got them marked," Nami replied absentmindedly as she helped Makino tie down the topsail. Then she paused, staring at Makino. "Makino, was that you just now?"

The older woman was already looking over Nami's shoulder, however, her eyes narrowed, as everyone else suddenly realized they weren't alone. "No, no it wasn't. We seem to have a uninvited guest."

All of them stared at the mysterious woman sitting on the bowsprit above the

entrance to the captain's cabin, her legs crossed as she sat there at her ease. She was a gorgeous looking woman, somewhere between Nami and Makino's age, wearing a cowgirl outfit complete with hat. She had darkly tanned skin as well, and blue eyes set in a gorgeous, if rather aloof and aquiline, face.

"What are you doing here, Ms. All-Sunday!" Vivi shouted, her peacock slashers suddenly twirling from her fingers.

"Ms. All-Sunday?" Nami asked. "Then does that mean she's..."

"Hai, she is the partner of Mr. O, of Crocodile! She was the one I followed to find out who he was!" Vivi affirmed as the others reacted in various ways to that. Zoro pulled out his swords, ready if the woman proved to be a threat, while Sanji had actually pulled a pistol from somewhere, pointing it at the woman's head from the side.

"You forget that I let you follow me," the woman replied, crossing her legs. She smiled at Sanji who blinked, then squawked as his pistol was knocked from his hand somehow, and he was hurled down to the deck to join the others along with Zoro. "It's dangerous to point such things at me," she said simply while Sanji blinked again, his eyes turning into hearts as he realized the woman in front of him was a real beauty.

Watching this in shock, Nami raised her voice, fear in her voice. "Luffy! Get out here!"

In reply Luffy burst out from the Captains quarters, looking at around wildly. He had been spending most of the time since leaving the others in the hot shower, then just dawdling, unwilling to leave the safety of the ship's interior given how many times he'd run into cold water lately.

"What's wrong?" he asked, quickly looking around. Then he followed everyone's pointing fingers and turned to look up at one of the most gorgeous pair of legs he'd ever seen. They were currently crossed, but from his angle that didn't really matter much as he had a view straight up her skirt. Eventually he blinked, then looked away, quickly holding up a finger. "Erm, in my defense," he said as he stared at the mainmast in front of him. "I didn't realize you were up there."

The woman who sat there, and it had to be a woman, not a girl with a body like that, chuckled. "Yes, but it is your fault that you looked for so long."

Luffy twitched his head to one side, frowning, as something appeared there: a hand attached to his face with two fingers trying to gouge out his eyes. One of them slammed into his nose without much force and the other into the side of his temple. He looked back up at the woman. "Interesting trick."

"Interesting reflexes," the woman returned, staring down at him. "So you would be Monkey D. Luffy? I've heard much about you. Indeed, Mr. Crocodile had

actually decided to send someone to find you to see if you wished to join our organization.”

Luffy smirked, the same cocky smirk that in his past life would've set his rivals to screaming or a few of the girls to blush. The woman in front of him didn't blush, but her lips curved into an answering smirk of her own as if she knew how he would reply just from that expression. “I'm not that much of a joiner,” Luffy said. “If I was, I'd have followed my grandfather into the Marines.”

“So you really are related to Monkey D. Garp then?” the woman said, smiling a little bit wider. “That's interesting, very interesting information there, though you shouldn't be so free with it. Garp has a number of enemies that might strike at him through you after all.”

“I can look after myself. As long as my Ji-Kure doesn't come after me himself.” Luffy shuddered, shaking his head of that image.

Even the newcomer twitched at that. “Yes, that would be bad.”

“But thank you for your concern, milady,” Luffy said before mockingly bowing, sweeping his straw hat off his head and letting it scrape on the deck for a moment before righting himself. “It is most appreciated.”

“Luffy!” Nami barked finally, while the mysterious woman laughed and Makino shook her head and Zoro and Sanji looked on with Vivi growing angrier. “This woman's on the other side!”

“Really?” Luffy asked looking at the mysterious woman then over at Vivi.

Vivi explained, and Luffy returned to staring at the woman their eyes locked almost in a contest of wills. “Then doesn't it seem,” Luffy said after a moment, “as if this woman's got an ulterior motive driving her more than her loyalty to Crocodile? Letting you follow her, coming out here on her own like this?”

“It could've been simply for my own amusement,” Ms. All-Sunday said a smile still in place. “After all, isn't it a fantastic tale to see firsthand, a princess going undercover to save her country?”

“I don't buy that for a minute,” Luffy said simply, still staring into Ms. All-Sunday's eyes as he crossed his arms while nearby Vivi had to be restrained by Makino from lunging at the woman. The woman was giving him some serious Nabiki vibes, but there didn't seem to be any cruelty to her. Ruthlessness, sure, those eyes told him the woman was someone who would follow her plans through to the end, but that didn't mean she would enjoy it.

“You don't give off the air of someone who would enjoy someone else's suffering like that, and trust me, I'm pretty good at noticing that kind of thing,” Makino

said. She was an excellent judge of character, one of the many non-physical things that had attracted Shanks to her. "But playing your own game? That you could be doing. Maybe using Vivi towards your own goal, or trying to set her up against Crocodile? What for, though? That is the question... demon child Nico Robin."

The other woman twitched, and Makino went on. "That is you, isn't it? I have a very old and very unflattering bounty picture of you somewhere. You were given a bounty at an incredibly young age, and the World Government has it out for you I believe. To be after something more important than a Shichibukai's protection from the WG, it would have to be for something important, a dram perhaps?"

"Enough about me or my supposed motivations," the now-named Robin said with a small smile, but there was little humor in it. Indeed she was rather alarmed by how these two had seen through her, at least to that extent. There was a lot they couldn't see, but they had discerned enough, far more than was good for her. Robin debated for a moment mentioning how she had been the one to 'kill' Igaram in order to anger these pirates, to get them to be more predictable, but decided against it. These pirates had already surprised her once, best not to give them more chances to continue to do so than she must to serve her own ends.

"This is an Eternal Pose to Alabasta," she said, and suddenly another appearing and disappearing hand flung a Log Pose at Luffy, who caught it deftly. "It will see you straight there, allowing you to bypass the other islands entirely. If you follow it, you might arrive in time to stop Crocodile's plans. Or you might not. That is up to you, your skills, and the vagaries of fate after all."

"Now I agree with Luffy," Zoro said leaning against the mainmast for a moment as he stared at the woman. "What's your game?"

"But," Vivi said, slowly looking at the Log Pose. "But if she is telling the truth and it's really an Eternal Pose, the time it would save us..."

"She's more than likely leading us into a trap," Nami said with a growl. "I can't agree with using that thing!"

"I don't like the idea either, though that's more because I don't like anyone else deciding my ship's course for me," Luffy said. "But I won't refuse it if you add something else to the pile," he said suddenly, smirking at Robin again. "How about you become a hostage to our good conduct? If you're leading us into a trap, you'll fall into it too."

"I'm afraid that's impossible!" Robin said laughing at his cheek. This pirate was quite a bit smarter than his image would suggest, and if he really did use the mysterious power called haki as Crocodile was worried about, he might be a threat to



Crocodile, which would fall into Robin's plans nicely. "Crocodile expects me back in a certain amount of time after all."

"And now I know you're not really on Crocodile's side. If you were you would have agreed to become our hostage and lead us into a trap in person. After all, your allies would know who you were and know not to attack you." Luffy said with a smile.

In reply to this Robin twitched before smiling in turn. *Quite a bit smarter*, she thought.

"Makino," Luffy went on, turning aside slightly to look at the green-haired woman. "Did you get any information on where the Log Pose will lead from here?"

Makino nodded. "It can lead to three different islands, but the most likely one is an island called Little Garden, apparently. It's a death trap, hence why Cactus Island is almost considered a dead end. Even worse, according to a few of the bounty hunters I questioned, no one knows how long it would take our Log Pose to set for the next island there. We'd simply have to keep on going and trust to luck from that point on."

Luffy actually shuddered a little at the very idea of trusting his luck on something so important. *But then again, maybe my crew's luck would offset mine...* Luffy thought for a moment, then shuddered again.

For her part, Robin was studying Makino, one of the two complete unknowns among the crew. After a moment, she smiled. Yes, this crew was quite a bit different than she had expected. She had, of course, utterly discounted the drawing of Sanji's poster in terms of any possible insight into his character, but the new poster circulating out from Logue Town showed Ranma grinning like a mad fool for some reason, his eyes alight and his smile so wide it distorted his face. The young man in front of Robin however was in no ways a fool..

"So," Luffy said looking back at Robin and holding up a fist. The fist suddenly gleamed black, and his eyes suddenly became serious, locked on Robin with even more intensity than before. "Whose side are you really on?"

Robin could still feel her mouth twitching, trying to form another smile even as Luffy suddenly threatened her, while also showing he really was dangerous, possibly even to a Shichibukai like Crocodile. Certainly he was to her, given what little Robin knew of haki. After a moment, she shook her head. "My own," she said plainly, before deciding to gamble once more. "Still, your suppositions are correct in several ways. I do wish Crocodile to be, if not weakened, then at least removed from the equation for a time. He and I have an agreement; in many ways we are using one another. But I have no desire to see his vision come about, and he has a history of stabbing people in

the back the moment they are of no use to him.”

Robin had gambled on their lack of knowledge and on her own knowledge of their nature and had lost badly. Moreover she was now unwilling to see if she could fight her way off the ship, not with her limited knowledge of haki. For now it would serve her better to stay aboard this ship, both in the long and in the short term. In the long term she could discover if these pirates were really strong enough to be of use. In the short term she would save herself quite a bit of pain and effort.

*And if they prove to simply be lucky or weak I can always escape later after leading them into the trap the orange-haired one is afraid of. Hmm... Best to also get the princess on my side, then.* “As long as you use the Eternal Pose and can bring Banchi aboard, I will agree to accompany you,” Robin stated. “And Princess, for your information your guardian Igaram is still alive. I removed him from that ship before blowing it up. His being alive will still pull a lot of attention away from this ship, as was his original plan.”

She looked back at Luffy. “I can even say that I am trying to hunt him down, or perhaps that you fled with him rather than these pirates, and I am trying to convince captain-san and his crew to join Baroque Works if Crocodile decides to contact me. He should not be, I am only due back in Alabasta in a week after performing a spot-check of our holdings out here, but you never know.”

“Good,” Luffy said with a nod while Vivi stared at Robin, trying to discern what the woman was thinking and if she was telling the truth. For his part, Luffy thought she was, though he also knew she wanted to hedge her bets. “Though we might have to look around for other islands on the way, we still need a doctor after all.”

Robin laughed again, shaking her head at the idea of anyone just ‘looking around’ for other islands in the Grand Line. Even with an Eternal Pose the Grand Line was a treacherous place. “If you wish, that might be possible. I know Drum Kingdom, which is on several of the routes to Alabasta, is known for its doctors. We might be lucky and intersect its weather system: it is one of only two winter islands between here and Alabasta, thus if we see a sustained cold front we will know it is close.”

“Then we have an agreement,” Luffy said with a grin, then moved over to the tiller, shouting orders to the others to get the ship moving forward once more. Soon enough, they were leaving the cove behind, with a giant turtle now taking centerpiece on the schooner’s deck.

Nami moved to stand beside Luffy, her face rigid with anger. Vivi quickly moved to join her, though she was looking more thoughtful than anything else, seemingly just too tired now mentally and physically to get up the energy to be more

than wary of Robin. "I don't like this. She's using us, that's obvious, just like she used Vivi and is still using Igaram! Why do you want her on the ship?"

"She's got a lot of knowledge in that head of hers, knowledge we can use, like that bit about Drum Island. And if Robin's using us at the moment, so what?" Luffy said with a shrug. "We're using her Log Pose and her knowledge. What's the difference?"

"The Log Pose can't stab us in the back!" Nami whispered heatedly. "You might be able to take her on, but what about the rest of us?"

"What would she gain by killing us now before we take on Crocodile?" Luffy asked, shrugging his shoulders once more. "Nothing. She has nothing to gain by playing us false at this point. Right up until Crocodile is gone she will play us as truthfully as she can."

Luffy trailed off for a moment, looking down at where Robin was helping to get her turtle comfortable. The turtle was a giant, narrow-bodied beast with a brown shell and a depressed expression. It also was smoking a cigarette, Sanji just having lit it. The two smokers nodded companionably to one another as they smoked. "Besides, she gave me the same sort of vibes that you did when I first met you."

Nami frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She's lonely," Luffy replied simply. "Lonely and alone. She got that bounty when she was, what, 11, 12? Even younger? The whole world's been after her ever since. That's a long time to be alone with no friends, hence her whole attitude."

"...I still don't like it," Nami said, though her voice was much softer now as she too stared down at Robin before turning away. "But you're the captain. Just watch her, that's all I ask."

Luffy nodded. "I intend to."

Moments later Robin stood next to him, the Log Pose in her hand again, and she smiled slyly at the captain. "You really are quite different than I expected."

"I get that a lot," Luffy quipped. Then, as they exited the long channel out into the ocean, he smirked at her. "Since I doubt the directions are second to the right and straight on to morning, what direction are we off to?"

Robin surprised herself by laughing once more before pointing out the direction, watching interestedly as Luffy turned the tiller, wondering about the young man and where he had come by his skills and his confidence. *Regardless of the outcome, this is certainly going to be an interesting journey...*

**End Chapter**

And canon goes boom, hahaahah!! I know I said I would try to stick to a one island per chapter sort of thing, but I felt that neither Laboon nor Whiskey peak alone merited their own chapters. As for Robin deciding to go with them, I think it's actually plausible that Luffy/Ranma would be able to see through her somewhat. Luffy had a scary ability to figure people out when he decided to use it, and I think at one point seemed to have some of Gol D. Roger's ability to 'hear all things', or whatever it was. Couple that with Ranma's ability to figure out his opponents and you get someone who can stare right through other people if he decides its worth the effort.

And of course using the Eternal pose means no giants. But since they were most important for their impact on Usopp, I felt that was okay, especially since this lets me play with some other islands. HOHOHO.