

Neither original universe is Vime's.

A warning: this chapter is heavily combat centered; should be obvious, but it has to be said. Also, just to make it clear, Raffy is not Luffy, and Crocodile has taken the Straw Hats somewhat seriously since the moment he heard of Raffy's Busoshoku and Robin defected. That is all.

This chapter has been betaed by *Michael*, so there will not be nearly as many mistakes as there would otherwise have been. Most particularly he spotted several jarring errors which would probably have caused a lot of confusion and maybe ruined the reading of certain sections of the story. Please join me in thanking him for his work there. I would also like to thank Tomon, who pointed out that the final fight between Croc and Ranma was not up to my normal standards when i posted this chapter originally on Patty R on.

Oh, I also have Smoker and a few others start referring to Luffy as Mugiwara, like in the original here - think it sounds better than the translation, and more like an insult.

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## Chapter 12: Warlord vs. Warrior

The day after Luffy and Robin had explored the ruins, the group came within sight of Rain Dinners via Geppo. Hopping nearly ten stories straight up from his crew, Luffy shouted that out, and Sanji quickly joined him, hopping up into the air to stand next to his captain. "You're getting better at that," Luffy said with a nod.

Sanji smirked, gesturing below them as his cigarette smoke blew away on an errant breeze. "Anything to get a leg up on the national treasure."

"Was that supposed to be a joke, Sanji? A 'leg up?'" Luffy asked quizzically.

Sanji blinked, then laughed, not having actually realized the pun there before Luffy pointed it out. Turning around, he looked out over the distance, and noticed a large bird of some kind. A *very large bird*, Sanji thought, putting one hand up above his eyes to block out the sun as Luffy had been using his straw hat to do the same. "Is it just me," he said after a moment, "or is that giant bird over there flying towards Rain Dinners?"

"Hmm, yeah, it looks it, and didn't Vivi say something about one of the warriors of the Royal Family being a Zoan-type type Devil Fruit user?" Luffy mused, now looking in the same direction as Sanji.

Sanji nodded, then, before Luffy could do anything, began to hop back down to the ground, whereupon he quickly came back up carrying Vivi. The blue haired girl was flushing slightly at being carried like this by the cook, but at the sight of the giant bird in the distance she forgot her embarrassment. She began to pull off the scrunchie that had been containing her

blue hair, letting it flap in the wind. She did not notice how Sanji took a deep whiff of her hair as it blew past his face, though Luffy did and rolled his eyes. Vivi refrained from shouting, however, knowing that her voice would never carry that far and being mindful of Sanji's ears.

The blue hair blowing in the wind must've grabbed the bird's attention, because it turned from its course towards Rain Dinners and came zooming towards them very quickly. As it came closer they could see more of the bird, and they noticed it looked like a falcon, only built as large as a human, and that it was wearing clothing: a white outfit marked with a pattern of dark purple knives or perhaps uneven crosses. The bird even had a turban on its head.

Luffy nodded his head down towards the ground, beginning to descend. "Let's meet him on the ground in case he has something everyone has to hear. And, um, what was that guy's name again, Vivi?"

"Pell," Vivi supplied, smiling and still waving her hands at the incoming falcon-man. "The greatest warrior of Alabasta!"

A moment later the giant falcon landed, changing form as it did into that of a tall man who wore the same robes that the bird had been wearing and a lightly curved blade at his side. He had dark purple marks around his eyes and down his cheeks, though whether they were painted on or tattoos none of the Straw Hat pirates could tell. He had the same sort of build that Sanji and Luffy did: slightly thin body, made for speed over strength.

The man quickly went to one knee in front of Vivi, placing one fist on the ground as he bowed his head his other hand held to his chest. "Vivi-sama, you cannot know how dearly you have been missed! When Chaka and I found the note explaining where you and Igaram had gone two years ago we had despaired of ever seeing you again, to say nothing of the worry this caused your father. However," he said, looking up at her, his face both serious and warm, "I could not have been more proud of you for attempting what you did. The same went for Cobra-sama and Chaka."

Vivi blushed while the crowd of pirates smiled but before any of them could say anything Pell went on. "The news that Carue brought us was grave, and immediately Cobra-sama decided that we needed to act on it. He has sent me in ahead of the army to aid you while Chaka and the king prepare the army to move out on Rain Dinners. Their mission will ostensibly be to quell the conflict between your friends here and Crocodile, but we will also be searching for further evidence. Unless the rebel army has force marched, they will be able to abandon the capital city and come this way quickly."

"Abandon the capital city?" Robin asked sharply. "Is that wise?"

Pell looked at her, but Robin thankfully saw no recognition in his eyes. "That was the king's orders," he said simply. "With the true villain in this tale known to us now, how could we not move against him?"

"That's nice and all," Luffy said, shaking his head. "But Croc's a Logia type. You're just going to be piling corpses on one another against someone like that unless you can counter his power somehow."

As Pell seemed to puff himself up with anger, Makino cut in smoothly. "Our captain doesn't mean any offense, but numbers truly don't mean anything against someone like that, only skill."

Vivi looked at them both then over to Robin, who had told them about Crocodile's power. She then nodded with a sigh, looking at Pell with her eyes narrowed. "Luffy-san is right. More bodies would, would simply make this confrontation all the bloodier. Also, we still need to make certain that there isn't more bad blood between the normal citizens and the rebels. We can't guarantee that the rebels won't loot the capital, after all. If I can intercept them and talk to Kohza then we can stop this war in its tracks."

"We're out of position for that," Nami said, shaking her head as she looked at the map. "There is no way we could get even to Alubarna from here, let alone wherever the Rebels are. Not even Luffy and the others Geppo-hopping the whole way would get us there in time."

"No, not all of us," Vivi said, smiling at Pell, who chuckled as he realized what she had in mind. "But some of us can, especially me. Pell, would you mind carrying me once more? I realize this will be for a far more serious reason than just to fly around, but..."

"You were as light as a feather back then," Pell interrupted, a fond smile on his lips, "and I have no doubt that you are still just as light today. I can easily carry Your Highness wherever you wish to go."

"Wait a minute," Luffy said, shaking his head. "I don't like the idea of you going alone. Do you think you could carry a few of my crew along with you?"

Pell nodded quizzically, looking at him. "I can, so long as it they aren't too heavy. But why?"

"There's always two sides of any battle," Luffy said with a shrug. "I really, **really** doubt Crocodile's the type to pull in his troops and prepare for a siege or something like that even if he knows we're coming. No, he'll still be pushing his own plan forward. And that means he'll probably have people in Alubarna to keep the chaos going if it looks as if the two sides are going to stop fighting, as well as stop Vivi from meeting with either side in person. "

"That makes far too much sense for us to ignore," Makino said, looking over at Robin.

Robin nodded. "At the least Mr. 2 will be there. Part of the plan that I knew about was to capture the king, and Mr. 2 has already used his likeness to start this entire revolution. And

your connection to the Rebel leader Kohza has always been a major source of concern for Crocodile's plans."

Pell looked at the older woman quizzically, wondering how she knew that and who she was, but Vivi nodded slowly. "That's true, and he has agents within the Army and the rebels too. I know that from my own spying in Baroque Works. We also don't know where Mr. 7 or his partner is."

Luffy looked closely at Robin, who after a moment nodded back, understanding what he wanted. "Crocodile is...call it habitually callous with his people. Yet at the same time he is personally cautious, while at the same time arrogant. With the knowledge that Vivi is in the country, Crocodile will double down. He will send another pair of agents at the least to back up Mr. 2, while also giving out orders to his agents to keep you and Kohza apart at all costs. However Crocodile will probably stay put and wait for any attack to come to him. he will also keep Mr. 1 and his partner with him at the least."

"So at least a few numbered agents?" Luffy asked thoughtfully and Robin nodded.

"I volunteer!" Sanji said, thrusting his hand into the air as if he was a student answering a question from the teacher. "Me! I volunteer!" A second later he captured Vivi's hand in his own and bowed over it, kissing it lightly on the back. "Every princess should be guarded by their knight, and that knight is me!"

While Vivi flushed in embarrassment Luffy ignored Sanji's over the top attitude, looking around at his crew and thinking about who to send who could add enough punch but also would not burden Pell. *That really only leaves Nami, Makino, and Chopper to consider. Sanji might be less bulky than Zoro and a little shorter than me in my normal body, but they are both still heavy. If I send either of them along, I wouldn't be able to send anyone else with them. And there is no way even Sanji could travel all that way via Geppo.*

Nami wasn't all that strong just yet, certainly not up to fighting a numbers agent, though Luffy intended to force her to fight some of the cannon fodder. Her skills were decent enough, and she had begun to use Kami-E, which was good, but she lacked hitting power. He was also still trying to find a specific style for her to learn other than staff-fighting, hence why she had a metal collapsing staff Luffy had made for her out of pipes from the ship's plumbing supplies.

*That leaves Makino and Chopper.* "Do you think you could carry Makino and Chopper?" Luffy asked, indicating the two of them with a wave of one hand.

Pell looked at the two of them and was about to reply in the negative, seeing the large, heavily muscled man standing to one side of Makino, a woman his own age perhaps with green hair. She would be no problem, but the two of them together plus Vivi would be.

But as he opened his mouth, the large man shrank his hat seeming a little too large and his clothes looking now as if he was wearing a tent. Pell blinked, then looking closely at the little creature, noting his horns and fur before nodding. "A Zoan-type user?"

The young creature nodded. "I'm Tony-Tony Chopper. I ate the human-human fruit. I'm a reindeer-human."

Looking between the three of them, Pell slowly nodded. "I could do it, I think. It will slow my return considerably, but let me take a practice flight and see."

With that Pell shifted into his falcon form and crouched down. He was large, with a wingspan at least as wide as Robin and Nami lying down head to foot, with a wide, thick body. But other than that and the fact that he still wore his clothing he looked exactly like a falcon, just built to a much larger scale.

The three passengers all clambered aboard while Luffy looked admiringly at the falcon. "Damn, it would be so awesome to fly!"

"You can already Geppo; what more do you want?" Nami asked.

"I know, but still, that would be awesome, to move through the air so fast and free!"

"It is," Pell said, smiling at the memory. "My first flight was one of the finest moments I'll ever know. Up there with actually being given the Falcon-Falcon Fruit in the first place."

Nami asked quizzically, "Why was that such an important moment?"

"Because it meant my devotion to the royal family had been noticed. It meant I could serve them better," Pell said simply. Hearing that, Vivi flushed a little as she finished clambering up in front of Makino. Chopper moved into her lap, and Pell pushed off the ground quickly.

After having some difficulty getting off the ground he flew around the small group on the desert floor for a few moments then came back, landing with a bit more force than he had before. The three passengers clambered off of him, and Pell shifted back to his human body, shaking his head. "I would have to take numerous breaks if I carried them all. Chopper, for all of his small size, is actually a quite solid little weight, and no offense to you ladies, but your weight does add up. Since speed is of the essence I think I should probably take Vivi-sama on her own."

"And that would leave you Vivi and your army to face these numbered agents and the hidden agents as well. I don't think so," Luffy said with a frown. "If Croc has sent agents to back up this Mr. 2, he'll have sent agents he knew could handle you and this Chaka guy at the very least. No, there has to be a way to overcome their weight."

"If I had thought I'd be turning right around I would have asked for the Super Spot Billed Duck Squad to meet me in Rain Dinners" Pell replied ruefully. "They are the fastest runners in the nation by far and could almost keep up with me on the wing."

"How about we create a balloon somehow?" Nami suggested. "A small one maybe that Makino could use."

As Makino paled at the very idea Luffy frowned thoughtfully, staring first at Pell, then at their supplies. "I could do it..." Luffy said thoughtfully, then nodded. "Would towing a balloon be faster?"

"So long as the balloon wasn't so big it would drag, that would speed up the journey quite a lot," Pell said with a nod. "In fact, if you could make it big enough for both Makino and Vivi, Chopper's weight alone would not affect my speed at all."

"Let's get to work, then," Luffy said, looking over at Sanji. Sanji was actually the next most handy of the crew, at least with knives and leather work. How that second one had come about, Luffy had forcibly stopped himself from asking. "I'll need a harness. Grab that saddle from the camel; see if you can flatten it out a bit and then add hooks to the ends."

"Gotcha, Cap'n," Sanji said with a nod, moving over. Then he paused, looking at Pell. "Would this actually allow you to take me along as well? Like the captain, I don't like the idea of sending Vivi-chan, Makino-chan, or even our emergency fuel supply into a fight like that."

At that Chopper roared about not being food and transformed back to his muscled form in order to attack Sanji.

While Sanji was dodging halfheartedly Makino smiled sweetly at him. Her ire at his chauvinistic attitude was currently overriding her...concern...over being in the air. "Sanji, not to put too fine a point on it, but until you start learning Busoshoku I'm actually a slightly better fighter than you are. Unless you would like me to prove it on you with this?" She pulled out a pistol, twirling it in her hand for a moment.

"Makino's right, she can handle herself," Luffy said, pausing his work to look at the two of them as Sanji held his hand to his chest as if Makino's words had wounded him. Luffy then looked over at Robin, cocking an eyebrow. "How much does Crocodile know about us?"

"He knows about the complement of your crew and the rumors of you knowing Haki. I did not tell him anything after coming aboard," she said simply.

Pell stiffened at that, looking at her and wondering for a moment, but Luffy ignored that, nodding. "Let's organize this entire thing, then. We want to take out Crocodile, but we also have to find evidence of his connection to Baroque Works and maybe to the conspiracy

against the royal family entirely. Just taking him out would stop his own plan, but would leave BW in place, and the war might well continue regardless at that point."

"Is there any one clue that could do that?" Nami asked skeptically.

"Dance Powder," Pell, Vivi, and Robin all answered as one. They all looked at one another, and the two women laughed before Robin touched Vivi on the shoulder lightly, indicating that she should speak.

She did so, smiling once at the older woman before looking around at the rest of the crew. "Dance Powder and what it does is the reason behind the Rebel Army: the idea that the royal family has been using it for decades in order to make their holdings and their capital more agriculturally plentiful than anywhere else. That we've used it to actually destroy new settlements, calling all available rain down where we wanted it instead of where it would naturally go. If there is one thing that would immediately prove Crocodile's culpability, it is a collection of Dance Powder."

"It's a highly illegal substance too. You have to have World Government permits to own any at all," Pell said. "In fact, if we can find some of that, we might even get the Marines on our side."

"I wouldn't get your hopes about that up. I'm afraid the marines might be a little pissed off at us for that," Luffy said, looking over to Robin, who laughed quietly, her eyes twinkling back at him as she remembered the last time Luffy had run into some marines.

"So, let's split into two groups right here," Luffy went on, pointing at himself then at Zoro. "Myself, my first mate here, and Nami will head right in. We'll make a big deal of it, make certain that all eyes are on us. Robin, Sanji, you two will sneak in and find some evidence. Only fight if you have to until you have that evidence and you have gotten it out of this casino of Crocodile's. After that, go wild!"

"Because we'll be going wild already," Zoro said, his hands touching the hilts of his swords affectionately. "I'm looking forward to facing this sword-man."

Luffy nodded, his own hands clenching and unclenching for a moment as he thought about facing a Shichibukai again. Facing Mihawk was, from what little he could remember, a rather one-sided affair. Luffy had been blinded by rage at the time to a level that he had never before felt in this life or as Ranma. But Mihawk had simply defended himself, launching no attacks of his own, and had been handling Luffy at his rage-fueled best easily. This time, however, Luffy was going to be in full control of his faculties, and he knew that that would make a difference despite Crocodile's Logia powers.

"Men," Nami and Makino said together, not for the first time, while Robin covered her mouth, chuckling quietly.

Sanji, however, simply made a heart shape with his hands and said, "Nice pairing, Luffy!" as Robin chuckled into her hand.

With that all done, Luffy and Sanji bent to their work while Chopper began to tie several ropes together into a single longer and stronger rope. Luffy used their tents to create a balloon sewing them together swiftly with a speed that had to be seen to be believed, his hands literally invisible to most of the watchers as he worked. Then he put it over the small portable cooking stove that Sanji been using as a field kitchen, watching as the balloon filled with air, before tying it off quickly, sewing it shut, and then tying it to the back of the saddle with several short lengths of rope tied around the balloon. "It might not be heavy enough to lift you, but it will be heavy enough to keep you in the air once you're moving."

"Oh, I'm so not looking forward to this." Makino muttered as she moved into the saddle. It was barely large enough for her and Vivi, the other woman sliding into place beside her. "Luffy-kun, remember that there is a reason I never learned Geppo..."

"Heh, sorry, Makino-nee, but remember that time you told me I needed to face my fears about furry demons? Well, this is sort of the same thing," Luffy quipped before letting go of the balloon not letting her get in a retort first. It actually did float a bit with both of their weights in it, but only a few feet off the air. "That good enough?"

"Get them into the air first, then I'll be able to pull them easily. Gaining height with that dragging me would be difficult," Pell replied promptly.

Nodding, Luffy and Sanji moved over, each of them taking a side of the makeshift saddle, which had been turned on its own side. This allowed the two girls, so long as they were friendly with one another, to sit side by side. Without further prompting they both hopped into the air, carrying the balloon and its occupants.

Almost immediately Makino began to panic. "This is revenge for all the times I've teased you, isn't it!?" she shouted, her hands clenching. One hand did so on Vivi's, and Vivi winced as the older green haired girl began to babble. "Oh, I don't like this; I don't like this at all! I'm seriously going to have to hurt Nami for suggesting this, and you, Luffy, for making this contraption!"

Luffy now smiled sympathetically, tapping one hand on the belt buckles that Sanji had made which tied the two girls down into the saddle. "Don't worry. These won't let you fall out. And the whole purpose of this set up is to get you and the others to Alubarna as quickly as possible. It'll be over before you know it."

"Pell should get us there in at most an hour and a half," Vivi replied with a grunt, trying to pull her hand free from Makino's grip and having little luck. Her voice came out pained on the last few words, which Makino noticed dimly and Vivi sighed in relief as the girl let loose her

hand. "It'll be over before you know it," Vivi went on more calmly as she repeated Luffy's words, putting that arm around Makino's shoulders and pulling her into a loose hug.

Pell flew up and the two pirates went to work. They attached the balloon via a long rope to a series of straps and a single hook Pell now wore on his back, right behind where Chopper sat. When they were done, Luffy thumped the giant falcon on the side as Sanji dropped back down to the ground. "You're good to go."

With that Luffy turned his attention to Chopper. "This is going to be your first fight as a Straw Hat, Chopper," he said, holding out his hand in a fist. "Follow Makino's orders if she gives any and always look out for the crew. You can handle this; you're a Straw Hat and a **beast** just like the rest of us, remember that!"

"R, right!" Chopper said, stuttering for a moment, but his back had straightened as Luffy spoke, and he held out a paw, thumping it against Luffy's fist enthusiastically. "We'll see you for the victory feast!"

At this Luffy grinned, then stopped using Geppo for a moment, letting himself fall towards the ground before reactivating it, hopping the rest of the way down. By the time he was down, Robin and Sanji had already dressed in their disguises.

For Robin this came in the form of a local dessert garb, complete with wrap-around cloth which covered her face, leaving only her eyes visible. Sanji's wasn't as elaborate, simply local pants and shirt with a pair of sunglasses over his face and no cigarette in his mouth. The last looked as if it actually pained him a bit, but as he had refused to change his hair style or color, they had decided to get rid of his cigarette, at least.

"Wait until we're out of sight, then start to make your way towards Rain Dinners on an angle, coming through another portion of the town," Luffy ordered. "And remember to ditch Eyelashes when you reach the edge of the town. We might need him later."

"I have done this kind of thing before, Captain-san," Robin said tartly.

"I know," Luffy said with a grin. "Just want ta make sure we're all the same page."

"I don't see why I have to go with you two, so we're not all on the same page," Nami said, her voice even more tart than Robin's. She had wanted to mention that earlier, but with Vivi's mission being time critical she had decided to wait until Vivi and her group were on their way.

"Because you still need experience fighting, Nami, and Robin knows the layout of the casino. And because you'd probably stop and try to steal from all the guests," Luffy said, his voice going from serious to teasing with those last few words.

Nami huffed, pushing him in the shoulder, but she didn't deny that. She did like money after all, and anything she personally stole was hers alone, unlike the crew's treasury. But she was slowly beginning to realize that she liked other things a lot more than just money.

"You need more experience against multiple opponents," Luffy said, going back to serious. "You've trained a lot; now it's time to put that training to work." Seeing that Nami still looked dubious, he decided to sweeten the pot. "And I promise I'll start trying to figure out a way to make you a special weapon to help, whatever happens. Besides, Zoro or I will be nearby if you run into a numbered agent

"Fine!" Nami growled, shaking her head, though she did look somewhat excited at the idea of a special weapon, though she had no idea what it could be. Her collapsible staff with its heavily reinforced ends seemed nice, but it wasn't what she would call special. "Let's just get this over with, then."

Before the three of them moved off, however, Robin touched Luffy's arm lightly. "Take this," she instructed, handing a small vial over. "It's the antidote for a poison that Crocodile's hook can secrete at his command."

Nodding, Luffy took it and winked at her. "I'll see you after this is all over, and then we'll have that talk with the king. After all we'll have done for him, there's no way he won't pay us our reward, er, that is, listen to our request. And if he doesn't, well, I suppose I'll need to do something to regain my pirate rep after all this merc work."

Robin laughed then moved over to stand by Eyelashes as Luffy knelt by Nami, letting her clamber onto the captain's back. Zoro moved to join him, and the two of them marched towards the town for about forty minutes from where they had parted with the others.

Once they were within a stone's throw of the outer edge of the large town, Luffy set her down. A bare instant later, however, they came under fire, a shout reverberating out as the musket balls flew. "There they are! Get them!"

Luffy dodged in place for a moment, watching the bullets zoom past them, while Zoro flipped one of his swords out, using it to block or slice the incoming bullets. Nami ducked behind the two boys. Her ability to dodge was okay, but not up to dodging musket balls actually shot rather than hurled by hand at her. "Baroque Works grunts, I guess?" Luffy drawled.

"Probably," Zoro replied in an equally bored tone.

While several of their fellows fired at the incoming pirates, who continued to walk forward as if they weren't taking fire, several dozen others charged out with swords and other weapons. The musket fire stopped as that group reached them, and Luffy and Zoro went to work.

Nami fought, of course, but after Zoro had used a Tatsumaki to slice through half of the crowd at once, her contribution was minuscule. She did, however, continue to use Kami-E, dancing around the blows and returning several hard ones from her weapon, in its club formation at the moment.

"Do you think they're trying to soften us up or just pin us down for the numbered agents to get here from the casino?" Zoro asked conversationally, batting down two of the Baroque Works agents quickly, while deflecting a blow from another the same movement.

"Maybe, but if Crocodile is trying to keep us away from his casino he's going to be very disappointed," Luffy said with a smirk.

So saying he grabbed one of the agents by the back of his head, lifting him up as he picked out another, sending him sprawling with a blow from the first's feet. Holding his captive up in the air like a shield towards a few scattered musket balls coming their way, Luffy addressed the man. "Tell your boss that we're here now, would you? And his welcoming committee sucks!"

With that Luffy pulled back his arm and hurled the agent towards the casino. There was a scream followed by a thump from the distance, as the man hit high up the pyramid that was the casino, causing a gust of stone fragments visible from here.

"You sure that guy'll survive to give Croc your message?" Zoro asked, taking a brief moment in the tumult of battle to send his captain a sardonic look.

"Don't know, don't care," Luffy said with a laugh.

A second latter the battle became much more serious. "Mugiwara!" Shouted a deep bellowing voice, and suddenly there was smoke coming towards them from one side of the road towards the casino.

"Oh well, if that isn't just fantastic!" Luffy muttered sarcastically, shooting out several Rankyakus into the smoke. "Smokey the little marine that couldn't is here."

Smoker appeared swiftly after that, pulling his smoke back into his body shape and glaring angrily at Luffy. "I knew you'd be here! What business do you have with Crocodile!?"

"No business other than shoving my foot up his ass so hard he tastes leather," Luffy said bluntly before going on tauntingly. "So really, you're kind of obstructing justice rather than upholding it now."

Smoker glared but didn't respond verbally. Instead his arms disappeared into waves of smoke as he launched himself at Luffy, his lower body disappearing into a column of smoke which launched him forward. "You'll never get the chance to face him, Mugiwara! White Vine!"

Luffy sighed sadly, tapping his feet on the ground and leaping into the air and towards Smoker, his legs and hands lashing out with air attacks to blow the smoke closing on him away. Once Smoker had pulled in his arms again, another Rankyaku lashed out, this one much sharper than the initial ones, slamming into Smoker's body with a physical force.

The Marine grunted, but stayed on his feet until his body entirely disappeared into smoke, shouting out, "White Blow!" filling the area all around Luffy with smoke.

Luffy grunted in turn, lashing out with air attacks in every direction to keep the smoke away from his body. One of the sections of smoke suddenly twisted into a fist, which caught him upside the face with a punch. Turning his head with the blow, Luffy shook his head and shouted, "I've taken worse hits off old grannies! You're gonna have to do better than that, Smoker!"

The smoke began to constrict, taking on a physical form, but Luffy lashed out again with air attacks, dissipating it before it could close around him entirely. One of those was a much sharper attack than the others, and as Smoker slowly reformed, he held his arm, wincing lightly. "How is it that a pirate like you is able to use one of the Rokushiki better than anyone else I've ever heard of!?"

"How many Rokushiki users have you actually met and fought?" Luffy asked quizzically. "As for making it actually hurt you, that's just a speed thing. But I gotta say, I'm little disappointed so far, Smoker! You're still only relying on your Devil Fruit power, which I showed I could counter in our first fight. Was your jutte really your only second card to play? That's disappointing."

Smoker growled but charged forward again, his hands disappearing into smoke as he launched them with rocket like force towards Luffy. "I will beat you this time, Mugiwara, and then I will find out what the devil your connection is to Crocodile and what is really going on in this country!"

Elsewhere more Marines joined the battle. They concentrated on attacking the two pirates, taking the Baroque Works members as a civilian militia of some kind, as they tried to get through them to close with the pirates.

"This is ridiculous," Zoro grunted, shaking his head while using the flat of his blades to parry several Marines away. He had no qualms with killing Marines, but under these circumstances it would've left a bad taste in his mouth. It wasn't like the Marines knew what was really going on here, after all, and frankly most Marines were too weak for him to feel right about killing them. It would be like a lion going out of his way to hunt bunnies. The Baroque Works agents, however, he put down without mercy, causing the Marines to cry out in shock at his ruthlessness, trying to get between him and the crowd of supposed civilians.

"Unbelievable!" shouted a voice, and Zoro stiffened as he slashed down the last Marine around him, sending him to the ground with a bruise to his shoulder that he would have for days.

"I thought better of you Straw Hat Pirates, yet here you are, Roronoa, cutting down random civilians!" Tashigi shouted, racing forward from the end of the block with more marines around her. "Your blades must weep to be so misused!"

"Are your eyes just for show, or are you blind even with those glasses of yours?!" Zoro shouted, pointing down at some of his victims, anger covering his initial shock and concern at her appearance. "They clearly have weapons and clearly were the ones who started this fight! If you think they're just random civilians, I dare you to search a few of them. Ever hear of Baroque Works!?"

Tashigi frowned, glaring at Zoro for a moment, then down at the bodies scattered around the streets. Most of them did indeed look armed and she frowned. There was no way a town this size could have that large a militia, she counted at least 50 bodies scattered around, with more out of sight from her around the curve of the street.

Still, that didn't really mean her duty had changed. "Regardless, we Marines are here to stop the bloodshed from spreading! You pirates might have some personal vendetta against Baroque Works or be here to challenge Crocodile, but you yourselves are still criminals! Before Crocodile can even get involved I will capture you in the name of justice!"

"That's some pretty convoluted justice you're using right there," Zoro replied bluntly. Then he looked over at Nami, who had just polished off two more agents. "Hey that's good timing," he said cheerfully, backing away from Tashigi. "Why don't you two fight it out and I'll go look for an actual challenge."

"Don't just pawn your fights off on me because you think she's pretty and you don't want to fight her!" Nami shouted back at him.

Zoro nearly tripped at that, staring over at the orange-haired girl. "What sort of maggoty-brained female logic is that, woman!? That's not the reason I don't want to fight her. It's just she wouldn't be a challenge."

"I'm not a challenge?! How many times are you going to insult me until you're satisfied?!" Tashigi shouted before Nami could reply.

Zoro was about to reply to both of them when he turned slightly, staring as a man stepped out of a building behind Tashigi, making his way calmly towards them. He was a tall man, a little taller than Zoro, with close cropped steel-gray hair standing out slightly on his black skin. Indeed, his hair looked almost like metal. He had wide thick brown lips sticking out further on his face, which was very pointed, with a large straight chin like a maul. He wore a loose

fitting shirt without sleeves open at the front, with the local variety of pants on his legs, and the kanji for the number '1' on his chest.

At the site of that mark and the feel of the man Zoro guessed his identity easily and grinned, first sheathing his blade and pulling out his bandanna, tying it over his hair before pulling out his blades again. "It seems the main guest has arrived."

Blinking Tashigi turned in that direction, waving the man off. "Citizen, please return to your home! The Marines will..."

She faltered as the man ignored her entirely, moving past her towards Zoro. A second later, she barely got her sword up in time to block a backhand blow which hurled her away over the nearest rooftop to land in the street on the other side, the man's reply of, "The weak have no place here," ringing in her ears.

The man continued to walk towards Zoro, not having even slowed down. "Bounty Hunter Roronoa Zoro. We've heard of you and your crew. You are not worthy to face Mr. 0, so he sent me to take care of you right here."

"You mean the mighty Croc is afraid of us," Zoro said as he pulled out his swords again, placing the hilt of Wado Ichimonji in his mouth. "I don't blame him. I wouldn't want to face our captain in a serious fight either."

That seemed to hit a nerve, as the man facing Zoro suddenly leapt forward, crossing the intervening distance quickly, his hands out and flashing towards Zoro. Zoro blocked the attack and heard the clang of metal on metal. He stared at the man's hands, which had formed into swords, the fingers all were small blades, the palm was metal and edged along one side. The arm beyond that looked like another sword. "So you really are a sword man!"

"Indeed. No swordsman has any chance against me. Your weapons or your skill will eventually fail, and then I will kill you," Mr. 1 said calmly. "You are no threat to me, and even less to Mr. 0."

"In that case, when I beat you I will have made the jump from cutting iron to steel," Zoro said just as calmly, his eyes glinting below his bandana with a wild air. A second later they charged once more, the clash of their blades a physical force.

**OOOOOOO**

Nami had of course taken the opportunity to run the moment the two powerhouses had clashed, believing getting away and hiding among the town's population was a better idea than . Instead, she looked around for more of the Baroque Works agents, only to realize that the majority of the agents in the area were already down or fighting the Marines in scattered little pockets of combat here and there, even as the Marines tried to subdue them without hurting

them. It was a chaotic situation, with the Baroque Work agents trying to shout out their innocence even as they cut down Marines.

This ended abruptly as a woman's voice shouted, "Attention, Marines! The attacking civilians have proven themselves to be members of the criminal group Baroque Works! Lethal force is authorized!"

With that the battle became far more organized as Nami watched. Groups of Marines began to link up and cut down the Baroque Works agents, outnumbered and out fought by the Marines. Nami breathed a sigh of relief as she moved back, intending to disappear into the limited alleyways of the small town.

"My, that's rather irritating," said a melodious voice behind her. "Ah well, I suppose our new orders come into effect now. Kill any Straw Hat we can, as well as any and all Marines in the town."

Upon hearing that rather bloodthirsty statement Nami rolled to one side as something raced overhead where her upper body had previously been. She kicked off the wall of the building to one side, leaping up over another attack before falling back to the busier street.

There Nami turned, staring at a rather attractive woman she'd guess as being somewhere around Makino's age, though she was wearing a outfit that Nami knew Makino wouldn't be caught dead in. It consisted of high heeled boots which came up to her thigh, connected by stockings to even shorter shorts than Nami would've been comfortable with. She had somewhat built shoulders and long thin arms, with dark blue poofy hair, almost like an afro but not quite, as it was a little flatter on top than to the sides and back. She had thick lips, dark green eyes, and pale skin.

She also was smiling evilly at Nami, moving towards her from the alleyway. "Sorry, missy," she said mock-pleasantly, all of her fingers suddenly turning into long spikes. "But you just drew the short straw."

"Kami-E!" Nami snarled, not answering the girl, knowing she had to concentrate. The woman stabbed and slashed at her, but Nami dodged around the attacks just like Luffy had been teaching her. She couldn't keep it up for long, but she hoped it would be long enough.

The blows missed almost looking as if the wind of their passage was able to blow Nami to one side, and the woman, who Nami guessed was Ms. Doublefinger, frowned. "Interesting little trick. Let's see how long you can keep it up!"

Instead of dodging backwards, however, Nami closed. Once within range she lashed out with a kick that took the woman in the side, using the momentum of that to push herself backwards out of range of any retaliation.

Landing on the ground, she leaped forward once more as the woman's entire body began to grow spikes. But before the process could finish, Nami brought her staff around into the other woman's face, sending her staggering backwards.

Now sporting a bloody lip and a bruised face, Ms. Doublefinger growled, sinking her fingers into her own shoulders. "Maybe I should have taken you seriously from the get go. I won't make that mistake again."

With that, the rest of her body finished its transfiguration, and her arms began to bulk up as she shouted an attack phrase. "Toge-Toge Dopping!" When she was done she charged forward, slamming into the side of the building behind Nami, and smashing straight through it.

Nami stared in shock at the amount of damage the other woman had done, the woman's spikes having cut through the stone like steel through wood, and she began to gibber a little bit in her head. *I can't take on someone like **that**. What was I even thinking!?*

Gibbering like that didn't help, but her feet seemed to know what to do. Nami found herself racing away from the house that the woman had destroyed before she could extricate herself from the rubble.

Ms. Doublefinger did so simply by slicing open a wall and walking out calmly, looking around for found the younger woman several hundred yards away already, and accelerating. Shaking her head in amusement, Ms. Doublefinger began to race after the girl, laughing wildly. "You think you can get away from me?"

She paused for just a brief moment as a troop of Marines came out, then twitched angrily as Nami shouted, "Pirate! She's right behind me!" and leaped over their heads. A few of the men there looked up, their hearts in their eyes, as jumping in one of the local garbs showed off a lot of leg. The others, however, kept their attention on what Nami had actually said and raised their pistols and muskets towards Ms. Doublefinger.

"SurrendAHHH!" was the only word one of them got out before Ms. Doublefinger was in among them, her spikes out, slicing and stabbing.

Two of her attacks were stopped, however, and she found herself facing the same woman who had shouted earlier for the Marines to start fighting back. Her body rather scuffed and her eyes blazing from having been so easily brushed aside moments ago, Tashigi barked out, "I don't care which group you're with! Surrender or I will use force!"

"Tell me, has that ever actually worked?" Ms. Doublefinger asked mock-pleasantly. With that her hand flew forward, spikes appearing all around it again, but Tashigi began to block or dodge her attacks quickly, the two women dancing around one another.

Even as she was doing this, however, Ms. Doublefinger was able to shoot out a spike towards where Nami had hidden, stabbing through the barrel she had been hiding behind and into the girl's ankle, Nami having dodged at the last instant forward almost out of the way. As Nami screamed Ms. Doublefinger said conversationally, "Don't think I've forgotten about you, dear."

Rolling away and holding her ankle in pain, Nami groaned. *I'm really going to have to learn some of that Tekkai technique. Damnit, I can't even run away! If she puts down that Marine, she'll just keep coming after me!*

"Hey, Marine girl!" Nami said, wincing as she got to her feet, working her ankle a little. It hurt like blazes, but it was able to take her weight still, which would have to be good enough. "What say we team up on this blue haired bitch?"

"Excuse me!" both other women shouted at Nami, stopping their fight for a second to glare at her.

Nami paled as she realized Tashigi too had blue hair. "I, I meant the one with spikes!"

"No," Tashigi said seriously, moving backwards so that she could keep both of the other women in sight without turning her body, her eyes still blazing. "I don't know you, but you must be one of the Straw Hat Pirates given the fact this woman is fighting you. I will never team up with a pirate, and I will arrest the both of you!"

"You're welcome to try, dear," Ms. Doublefinger said in her normal mock-pleasant tone, making Nami think of Makino for some reason, except somehow inverted.

As Nami raised her staff into a defensive position, she shook her head at that thought, wondering once more why this was happening to her, and if she should try to run regardless. One thing she was certain of however. She was going to smack Luffy for forcing her to fight like this in the first place.

**OOOOOOO**

Sanji and Robin had successfully skirted around the town for a while, entering it at a different point than their crewmates and completely avoiding the fight occurring in that part of the town. A fight, Sanji noted, that seemed to be growing and spiraling out of control, with more and louder sounds of battle echoing over the town.

His thoughts were interrupted by Robin placing a hand on his shoulder, causing his eyes to turn into hearts as he turned to her. "Yes, Robin-chan? What can I do for you?"

"We're nearly there," she whispered. "Remember, we're not here to confront Crocodile or even be seen at all if we can help it. We're to find some evidence against him and get

out." *And if I can find out anything that points to where the Rio Poneglyph is and why he thought we needed to kidnap Cobra all the better.*

They walked toward the entrance of the casino they passed over a small bridge that spanned a tiny part of the lake that was next to the town. As they did, Sanji noted dozens of the so-called Billions running towards where the fight was and had to fight back a laugh. Robin smiled too. "Your captain makes a fantastic decoy."

"Harsh, but rather true at the moment, Robin-chan," Sanji said with a smile, opening up the door to the casino. "It's a pity you have to cover your face with that wrapping," he went on, reaching out to pull lightly at her turban. "Otherwise this would be a most fantastic date."

Robin rolled her eyes, but did not reply with anything more negative. Flirting like that was just Sanji's way. "Come on. Remember to skirt around the edges of the main floor, but look as if you're interested in some of the smaller games going on."

In the casino they found that the battle outside really had yet to penetrate the casino's walls. There was no fear here, no running people or even raised voices, as if the battle outside wasn't happening at all.

The two of them exchanged a glance, somewhat confused at that, but Robin murmured, "Crocodile probably doesn't want it known that pirates have arrived, or anything about his operations elsewhere that might impugn his legitimate business here in the casino."

Sanji nodded, but before he could reply one of the workers nearby spoke up, answering a question posed by a few of the other patrons. "...There is nothing to worry about, of course. Indeed, our patron, the Shichibukai Crocodile, is not even going to bother himself with them. These troublesome pirates are just rookies, after all. He has instead called in the Marines to handle it."

The two crewmen exchanged a glance at that, and Sanji groaned. "We didn't anticipate the Marines being here," he said worriedly.

"Worry about them later," Robin ordered. "Judging by how easily captain-san was able to deal with Smoker the last time they met, I doubt he's much of a challenge. His people are probably more of an issue to the other two, but even there swordsman-san should be able to look out for navigator-chan."

"Ah, my poor Nami-chan," Sanji moaned, almost looking as if he was about to break down and cry. "Oh, if only I could be there to make certain of your safety rather than that shitty Marimo!"

"You'll be able to do that soon enough," Robin said soothingly as they moved further into the casino, coming upon the entrance to the back service area of the casino. "Now follow me, and step as I do."

Having been with Crocodile for so long, Robin knew where many of the traps and sensors were in the rest of the casino and was able to easily bypass them as they moved deeper into the back of the building and away from the public area. One of the traps, however, had been moved, and as Robin stepped forward, she felt a click beneath one of her boots. "Watch out!" she shouted, just as the ground beneath her and Sanji gave way, dropping them down into a pit.

Or it would have if Robin had not activated her Hana-Hana power quickly. Hands formed along the sides of the hole, reaching down and grabbing first her and then Sanji, grabbing him so he dangled right below her. She idly noticed he tried to look up her skirt disguise and seemed depressed to discover she still wore her normal cowgirl shorts underneath, but decided not to comment on it, concentrating on more important things.

"This wasn't here when I was here last, but I suppose I should've anticipated... What is that?" Robin cut herself off as she noticed a green drop of something appear on the side of the pit's wall above them.

That single drop became a flood of green slime pouring down like a river into the pit. "Ara..."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle!" Sanji grunted, flipping himself upwards. He placed both his hands lightly on Robin's shoulders for a moment lashing out with his feet so fast above their heads his legs were a mere blur. "Anti-manner Kick Course!"

Sanji's kicks impacted, flinging and dispersing the green muck to either side of the two of them hanging there. As he did, however, some portions of the green sludge became needles, slicing Robin and Sanji here and there. Wincing as the back of his hand was cut open, Sanji shouted. "Lift us up out of the pit, Robin-chan. I'll defend you, fair damsel, never fear!"

Robin did so, slowly pulling them upwards while Sanji continued to use his feet to kick the green sludge away. He had to actually flip himself down or to either side in order to do so. But Robin lifted them up quickly, and a second later Sanji could push-off with his legs into the air above the pit, where he lashed out again and again, using weak versions of the Rankyaku. He couldn't cut wood or anything solid with it yet, but it served to push away or at least disperse the green slime.

Robin quickly followed him, and then the bits and pieces of slime began to actually climb up the side of the pit, fighting gravity as if it was under someone's control. When it formed into larger smears, they formed into massive spikes that shot toward Sanji, forcing him to dodge. He tried to kick one, but found it was so solid his kick bounced off it in this form and the large

spikes were too heavy for him to kick out of the way. Instead he dodged to one side, landing by Robin as they stared at the pit.

The two pirates watched with wide eyes as the remaining bits and pieces of sludge slowly drew together up out of the pit connecting to the spikes and absorbing them. Soon after that they formed into the image of a tall man, and slowly color began to spread through the green. The man was tall, taller than any of the crew, with wide, dirty blonde hair down to his shoulder and a sneering face with a heavy, powerful chin. He wore a uniform that looked almost like that of a Marine admiral's, a loose coat, white pantaloons, and white shirt.

Robin stared in shock, her expression visible since she had lost her headdress when they fell. "General Gasparde!"

"You know this man, Robin-chan?" Sanji asked, flicking out a cigarette and popping it into his mouth before lighting it. He ignored the small cuts littering his body though making a note of the ones on Robin, vowing to make this bastard pay for each of them in turn.

"I do. He is a former Marine who mutinied against the Marines and took one of their most powerful warships for his own, after which he became a very notorious pirate! His bounty is actually only ten million beli less than Crocodile's! Why is he here now, though..." Robin said, muttering the last words to herself as she moved backwards slightly, her eyes wary and her arms crossed over her chest just in case.

"I had grown tired of my normal games," the large man said slowly, showing that he had heard Robin's voice, arrogance flowing from every word. "And Crocodile offered me an alliance. None of his normal underlings specialize in capturing their opponents, and I am not so foolish as to turn down the patronage of a Shichibukai, especially one with such an intriguing plan! Why in the world you would ever have gone against him is beyond me, Nico Robin. The power you could have wielded if you had stayed by his side and helped him to resurrect this weapon, this Pluton, he is searching for."

"Ambition like that has never been part of my dream," Robin said honestly, even as she prepared herself to run or fight if need be.

"And that is a pity indeed," said Crocodile, appearing from around the corner behind Gasparde. He too was a tall man, at least a foot taller than Luffy or Sanji and Zoro, but not quite as tall as Gasparde. He wore a very good suit and trousers combination with a long flowing fur coat, had a scar on his face, and a large cigar clenched between his teeth. He also had a hook which seemed to have replaced one of his hands.

Sanji noted that the so-called general stiffened a little before moving to one side, allowing both of them to stand side-by-side on the other side of the pit from Robin and Sanji as well as to keep an eye on one another. But whatever their distrust in one another, Sanji knew

he was overmatched, and immediately began to look for a way out, slowly retreating one foot behind the other.

"You could have been the most powerful woman in the world. You could have had anything you wanted, even beyond your foolish personal obsession. But now you will watch your new crew die, and I'll still have you read out the instructions for Pluton one way or the other, Nico Robin," Crocodile continued as he stood beside Gasparde as if he hadn't noticed or didn't care that Robin and Sanji were backing away from them.

Before anyone else could do anything Sanji's foot lashed out to the side as he grabbed Robin pulling her to him. The wall collapsed and he flashed through the rubble using Soru. Even so, several large spikes of that same green sludge that Gasparde was made of slammed into the ground where the two of them had been and then through the rubble and dust of the wall. One of them impacted something as the tip was tinted with red as Gasparde retracted the spikes back into his body as the rubble began to settle.

Crocodile's arm disappeared into sand, his hand moving forward on a thin wave of sand to touch the rubble of the wall. The rubble seemed to crack, then erode into dust under his touch, leaving the two men to stare out into the environs of the tiny island Rain Dinners had been built on. Beyond it the water moved with several large banian, massive alligators that had odd banana growths on their noses. Neither Robin nor Sanji were there, though there was a small blood trail which ended abruptly. But neither man seemed unhappy about this; it simply meant their prey would die tired.

"Remember," Crocodile said calmly looking up at the somewhat taller man. "I need her alive. As for the other one, how you deal with him is up to you."

"So long as you keep your end of the bargain, I will bring Nico Robin back to you," Gasparde nodded. The two men stared at one another as Crocodile nodded his head. Both of them knew they couldn't really trust one another, and both of them knew that this alliance was only temporary. If Crocodile showed a moment of weakness, Gasparde would strike, supplanting him if he could. And if Gasparde proved a liability, or even showed any inclination to strike at Crocodile, Crocodile would do away with him as well.

Before that could happen, however, the rest of the pirate crew that Robin had seemingly taken up with would have to be dealt with, and the operation against the Alabasta government and revolutionary forces would be brought to a successful conclusion. Until then, they could at least trust one other.

"I will go and deal with the captain," Crocodile said, slowly moving across the pit on tiny motes of sand. "You, deal with those two. The second half of your reward will be given to you after I am crowned king of this nation and have the blueprints of Pluton in my hand."

"Of course I'll do as you ask," Gasparde said. "We are, after all, allies." Crocodile looked at him, and they exchanged thin smiles before turning away.

Gasparde moved back through the casino, thinking that the two of them might have doubled back inside. At the same time, Crocodile turned his attention to the town around his casino.

**OOOOOOO**

"What was that?" Sanji muttered, hissing as he touched his side, which had been impaled by one of the spikes which Gasparde had shot out after him and Robin as they had ducked under the rubble he had created. The wound was small, but deep, and he was forced to wad up his handkerchief and tear off a bit of his disguise to use as a bandage. "What kind of fruit does Gasparde have, do you know?"

"According to reports, Gasparde ate the Candy-Candy fruit. He can make himself gelatinous, though he can't really create more of it, not like Ace could with fire. But he can also harden it into something strong as steel, as we saw. I have no idea what kind of weaknesses he might have," Robin said breathing in deeply. The two of them were hiding up on top of the Crocodile statue that was part of the casino's entranceway, out of sight at the moment and hopefully out of mind.

Sanji shook his head, looking up at the sky as he brought out another cigarette, lighting it then, staring at the end of it thoughtfully. "Candy..." he muttered, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Actually, I might be able to fight him then. You go and see if what you can find in terms of evidence, Robin-chan. I'm going to take a brief detour to the kitchens..."

**OOOOOOO**

By the time that the fight in the town around Rain Dinners had begun, Makino and the others had already come within sight of Alubarna and were slowly settling down towards land, such was the speed of air travel in comparison to walking. Thankfully for Vivi's ears Makino had long stopped screaming, though not before practically deafening Vivi in one ear.

But Vivi thought that her quiet, exceedingly heartfelt vows to brutally murder Luffy and Nami for getting her into this were somewhat terrifying. She had turned green numerous times as the woman, who she had always thought of as kind and almost sisterly, went into bloodthirsty details as she described what she would do to her crewmates.

Pell had mercifully been out of range of most of Makino's words, though not her shrieking earlier. Despite that, it was still with a bit of relief that he began to spiral down to the capital. "Chopper, could you tell the two ladies that were coming in for a landing?" he asked. He had been having a nice conversation with the younger Zoan-type as he gave some tips about different ways to use his different forms in combat.

Chopper nodded and was about to turn to do so when he caught a flash of something to their side. "What's that?" When Pell looked at him quizzically, Chopper explained. "Something flashed over there in the face of that large clock tower... Ahhhh! Now something's shooting at us!"

From the large clock tower set to one side of a large open square came something like tiny square-sided bullets of some kind. Thought they weren't actually being shot at Pell. Rather they were being shot at the balloon behind them.

Before they could close however Makino had spotted them and fired at them with her pistol, destroying them before they could come close. An instant later, several normal musket balls began to fly up one after another from the clock tower.

"What in the world is going on? Who would be firing at us in our own capital?!" Pell shouted. Below in the square, several soldiers who had been bustling around began to move in the direction of the clock tower too, but Pell decided to deal with this on his own. "Hold on, Chopper!"

As Chopper's hooves clamped down on the back of Pell's shirt and the two girls were shouting out questions and curses in their balloon as it was nearly dragged sideways from his sudden movement, Pell banked to one side, zooming towards the clock tower faster than the bullets could adjust for. He pulled up directly in front of the clock tower's face, and switched forms to his half falcon/half human form, ignoring how tight the strap around his waist became as he did, his clawed hands reaching under his wings. From two pouches below his wings he pulled out twin Gatling guns and began to hose down the front of the clock face and the little room up on top of it with musket balls

Pell could actually remember that little room rather fondly. Vivi and her young friends had hidden away up there, calling it their secret base, though it wasn't really very secret to him or the other Royal guardsmen. He was sorry to do this, but judging from the weight of fire, there had to be several enemies of some sort in there. And with the Princess behind him, Pell wasn't in the mood to wonder whether or not they were Baroque Works agents or someone else.

After that he peeled away, letting the balloon slowly move around the clock tower as below him several hundred or so Royal Army guards stormed into the tower from below. The flash of blue hair as Vivi leaped from the balloon onto the sill of the clock towers tiny room caused a vast susurrantion of noise as the guards recognized their princess. She was quickly followed by Makino, who moved just as easily, if not as gracefully.

With its passengers gone, Chopper quickly loosed the rope holding the balloon to Pell's back, and the Falcon Zoan flew once more around the clock tower before landing on the windowsill, Vivi and Makino having moved further into the area.

"What is that doing here!?" Vivi growled, pointing at a giant cannon that had somehow been installed in her and her friends' secret base. "How could someone have gotten this up here without anyone knowing?"

"I rather expect that some people did. Remember that you said Baroque Works has agents both in the Royal and Rebel armies, they could no doubt have made certain their people were on watch then they moved this in." Makino replied, looking over at Pell. "Speaking of, maybe you should stop those guardsmen from running up here? Just in case."

Pell nodded brusquely, wondering once more who this green-haired woman was. She spoke and acted with authority at times that belied her normal attitude, which was as far removed from the normal way pirates acted as one could imagine. Despite that, he did as she asked, heading to the door and ordering the army troops to turn around, wondering if she had been right and there were BW agents among them. But he decided not to jump at shadows and simply waited.

Behind Pell, Makino jumped up to stand on the lip of the cannon, which was about as wide as she was tall. Vivi suddenly noticed the bodies of two dead agents, both of whom had been riddled by Pell's bullets. She recognized them both, the missing Mr. 7 and Miss Father's Day. Before she could think of what she thought about seeing their bodies like that, Makino's voice interrupted her. "There's a bomb in here. I'd say a very big one just judging by its size, though I'm not an expert. There seems to be a timer on it, but I can't be sure. I'm not strong enough to turn it around and see, but I think I'm hearing ticking."

"Out of the way, Makino," Chopper said, shifting to his strong form. "I'll get it out of there."

As Chopper exchanged places with Makino, Vivi began to shake in anger. "What is a bomb doing here? And with a timer? What was Crocodile planning?"

Makino shrugged. "It was no doubt intended as a last-minute ace in the whole. After all, Crocodile wants both the rebels and the Royal Army wiped out; the how of it doesn't really matter to him. He could always blame it on rebels or the Royal Army wanting to take their opponent down with them, an explosion going off in the Royal Army's weapons depot, or something else entirely. Regardless, it would wipe out all of his real enemies at one stroke, leave Crocodile with the plans he wants, ostensibly, and a major power vacuum he could step into easily with his clout as a local hero."

"That's so evil! So even if we were able to convince the two sides to stop fighting, this would still be in here?!" Chopper gasped, working his fingers around the large mass of the bomb, pulling it out of the cannon slowly but surely, the noise of iron scrapping against iron nearly drowning his voice out.

"Yes," Makino said simply, before falling back away from the cannon's edge as Chopper pulled the bomb out. Pell had to help for a moment to get it out of the mouth of the cannon, but once they could examine it Makino found the timer at the back of the bomb and nodded. "It's on a timer, for about four hours from now."

The group were then interrupted by a voice previously unknown to the Straw Hats, saying, "That is remarkably well-timed. The rebels are about four hours away, judging from their rate of speed."

They all turned to see an unknown man standing there, although it was quickly apparent that he was only unknown to Chopper and Makino. Vivi shouted, "Chaka!" and raced over, hugging the large, if somewhat thin man, who hugged her back just as tightly.

"Vivi-sama, it is amazing to see you again! But, but I thought the plan was for Pell to help you and your allies in their fight against Crocodile? What's going on?"

After a round of introductions Makino quickly explained their reasoning to the head of the Royal Army, who winced at various points, not least of which was the idea that the Royal Army would not have been any real help against Crocodile. That hit his pride hard, but so did the fact someone had sneaked a bomb into Alubarna without him knowing. "So what are we going to do with that?" he asked, gesturing to said bomb.

"I'll dispose of it," Pell said coldly. "I should be able to lift it and get it out of the city."

"I wonder how many of Crocodile's agents knew it was here. Those two evidently did, but did they know it was on a timer?" Makino said thoughtfully, watching as Pell switched forms and grabbed the bomb by a small handle set behind the timer, lifting it into the air with massive flaps of his wings.

"Does it matter right now?" Vivi asked.

"No, but it might if there are other agents around. Why fight if you can talk them out of fighting, pointing out this betrayal to them?"

Vivi nodded at that, then brightened. "In fact we should make it known that the bomb was going to wipe out the entire city. We can't defame Crocodile among the public yet, but the Royal Army is a different story. Tell them that, and maybe the agents hidden among the army will refuse to carry out whatever orders they've been given."

"That is a good idea, Vivi-sama, but I'm afraid even if it works they've already struck a terrible blow against us," Chaka said sadly, looking between the slowly ascending Pell and Vivi. "The king is missing."

"What!?" Vivi shouted, staring at him in shock. "What do you mean!?"

"Cobra-sama had just ordered Pell to Rain Dinners to meet with you, and I had begun work on sending out overtures to the rebels and preparing the army to march, when a few of the servants discovered your father was missing. Since then, all our plans have stalled. I swiftly set up a cordon around the city, and I do not believe they were able to escape the area before that, but our search parties have yet to find him," Chaka reported. "We were aided in this by the arrival of a company of Marines under Captain 'Black Cage' Hina."

Makino frowned at that, looking over at Chopper then down at herself before chuckling quietly. "I just thought of another reason why it was a good idea to send myself and Chopper on this mission. Neither of us has wanted posters at this point."

Chopper nodded at that, but was still looking quizzically over at Chaka. "How was the king kidnapped?"

"We have no idea," Chaka replied to the younger Zoan's question before sighing sadly. "At least some spies or agents were able to get into the palace, that is plain. It would never have happened if Igaram was still in command, but that is not important right now. Vivi-sama, would you like to meet with the captain? She has been invaluable in searching for the king. We've already canvassed half of the city with her aid, and it's only a matter of time before we canvass the other half."

Vivi frowned, thinking hard, wondering where her father would have been taken to. She knew that this was a part of Crocodile's long-term plans regardless of her or her crew's involvement, but where would they hide him? "Somewhere where Crocodile could find him afterwards, and probably somewhere out of the range of the bomb," she said aloud, then sighed. "Somewhere out in the desert, I suppose. I'm afraid that he probably has slipped past your cordon, Chaka."

"Perhaps, but remember that it's doubtful that his agents knew about this bomb," Makino cautioned. "If their orders were simply to hide him away somewhere, they would not have bothered with that. And Crocodile could have planned to arrive before the bomb went off to remove the king, or perhaps also created a safe house within its radius which would protect him. I'm afraid you can't call off the search just yet, which means you will need to meet with this Captain Hina. Although, I wonder why the Marines are volunteering their help now? Have they ever done so before since this rebellion began?"

"No," said both Chaka and Vivi, and Chaka went on as he escorted Vivi down the interior of the clock tower, with Makino and Chopper following. "The Marines never involve themselves in the internal politics of nations, so long as neither side has said they would toss out the World Government. There must be something else going on here."

"Which means either they've begun to investigate Crocodile for some reason, or are still after us," Makino replied softly, so as to not be overheard by the crowd of soldiers around them as they exited the clock tower. "We will have to be careful, then."

They found Captain Hina at a desk set up by the entrance to the palace. On the desk was a map of the city, which she was using to help direct both her own troops and the Royal Army, pointing out areas which had already been searched. She looked up as Vivi was escorted towards her, her eyes lighting in interest. "The wayward princess has arrived. The reason myself and the Marines are involved in this little war of yours at all, though it seems the idea of your having been kidnapped by pirates was in error. Hina happy."

"I'm sorry?" Vivi asked drawing herself up with as much of her princess-given hauteur as she could to stare coldly at the other woman. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"My colleague Captain Smoker intercepted a communiqué mentioning the Straw Hat Pirates, Baroque Works, and Mr. O. We came and attempted to head off whatever nefarious scheme the Straw Hat Pirates were attempting, although they escaped."

Makino spoke up then, putting one hand to the side of her face as if in thought. "Is that what that was! We were actually in that port city when some kind of fight was going on. There was quite a lot of smoke and fire. I thought some kind of explosion had occurred, but you say that the pirates escaped?" she asked innocently, her eyes alight with barely concealed humor.

Hina's eyes flicked to her, then down to Chopper. "Hina irritated. Indeed. And who are these two, princess?"

"They are two of my personal bodyguards and my friends," Vivi said haughtily.

"This little one, he looks like a tanuki, certainly not tough enough to be a bodyguard. Hina skeptical," Hina said, gesturing down towards Chopper. Her glance at Makino seemed just as dismissive, but actually wasn't, instead being sharp and assessing. The way the green-haired woman stood spoke of confidence and experience in equal measure.

"I would warn you not to underestimate either of them," Vivi replied, still coldly, while Chopper growled a little at being called a tanuki. "So you are only here to try and stop whatever plan these Baroque Works and Straw Hat fellows have in the works, not to actually help us?"

"Since then we have come upon evidence that might point to a group called Baroque Works interfering in this civil war of yours. I was sent to speak to the king, only to be informed by the palace guards that the king had been kidnapped. No revolutionary would have done that without then shouting it out as loudly as possible, so we're assuming it's either the Straw Hats or Baroque Works. Baroque Works is a criminal organization, so whoever kidnapped him, aiding the search effort falls under our purview. However we will not take sides in your civil war," Hina replied.

The evidence in this case was a small restaurant filled with dead BW agents and weapons, along with some paperwork saying more weapons had been sold to the rebels recently. There was also a Den-Den Mushi, which had still been morphed to look a bit like

Crocodile, as the devices always morphed slightly to look like their owners. The Marines, thankfully, had no way of knowing this windfall had come from Robin's response

Hina once more looked closely at Vivi and her companions. They were hiding something, she could tell, but not about what just yet. "Do you have any ideas?"

Makino looked down at Chopper, "Could you use your nose to find the king?"

Rolling his eyes, Chaka spoke up. "Don't bother. I'm a Zoan type myself, a jackal, actually. The kidnappers knew that and dropped several perfume bombs to cover their trail."

"Ooh, that's nasty," Chopper replied, wincing and holding his nose protectively with both front hooves.

"Hina amused. That was actually the first thing I asked too," Hina said. "Still, we are running out of time here before the rebels arrive. I will have to pull my Marines out the moment they are within sight of the plateau, and we still have half the city to search."

"Let me worry about that," Vivi ordered imperiously. "I will head out momentarily to meet with them. Before that, however, I think we need to make certain nothing inopportune can happen on our side of this conflict."

OOOOOOO

Luffy and Smoker continued to clash here and there over the town. Luffy's speed and air attacks continued to stymie Smoker's use of his Devil Fruit powers, and as Luffy had feared, the man hadn't added anything new to his repertoire, not even a new weapon. Because of the way he was slowly losing, or perhaps because he knew Luffy was holding back, Smoker quickly began to lose his temper. "Damn you, Mugiwara, take me seriously!"

"Why?" Luffy asked, somewhat seriously. "I mean, you're not showing me anything new. Besides, I need to keep up my strength for the main event."

At that Smoker seemed to lose what remained of his self-control, his body once more disappearing entirely into smoke as his fists and feet flashed into existence here and there. Luffy grunted as a few punches landed, but between one second and the next, he kicked out at one of the hands, as it began to dissipate, his foot flashing black right before impact. Smoker gasped in pain, his body pulling back together for just a second.

As his foot returned to normal, Smoker gasped as his jutte appeared, shooting out like a spear from Luffy's sleeve. The end with the seastone in it slammed into Smoker's chest, and Luffy grabbed the other end of it, using it like a lance to carry Smoker's body backward and down to crash onto a roof.

"B, bastard," Smoker groaned, feeling his body become limp and unresponsive under the seastone's touch. "Freaking adding insult to injury, using my own weapon again!"

"Heh, pissing people off is an art, baby!" Luffy laughed, putting his foot down on the other man's chest next to the jutte. "Now, as you have a time out, Smokey, I'm going to go find Croc and feed him his own asshole. Do try to get better before you come after me again, else I'll start to consider ya an annoyance rather than a threat, 'kay?"

Looking around, Luffy could see Zoro still fighting a few blocks over, but couldn't make out anyone else. *Huh, where's Nami?* Thinking that, Luffy hopped into the air and used a mixture of Geppo and Soru to head over that way.

Landing on a nearby rooftop, he watched Zoro and Mr.1 clash from one end of the street to the other. Zoro looked like he had taken a few cuts here and there, but nothing important, while Mr. 1 in turn was scuffed, but not injured looking. He also noted that Zoro seemed to fall back on a rather linear style rather than move from side to side or around, and Mr. 1 was the same way. *Something to think about in the future. It's a weakness.*

As the two men met in the center of the street he called out, "Hey, Zoro!"

The two men pushed back away from one another, looking in his direction briefly before glaring back at their opponent. "Don't interfere, Luffy! This is my fight!"

"Wasn't even thinking about interrupting, though that guy coming this way over the rooftops might have a different idea. Just wanted ta ask ya if ya knew where Nami was?" Luffy asked.

"How should I know?" Zoro growled, shaking his head but not looking away from Mr. 1. He did, however, see the man Luffy had mentioned. He hopped down from another rooftop and raced in their direction, his hands hanging down his sides as he raced forward hunched back like an animal, running towards the two combatants. Around his wrists he wore long hooked claws, and on his face he had a large 'X' tattooed through what looked like a Marine sigil. "The witch ran off when 1 here showed up."

"Kay, I'll leave you to it, then," Luffy said, making no move to attack the man with the 'X' on his face. "Have fun."

Grinning like a shark, Zoro nodded, then charged forward. The newcomer tried to take him from the side, but as Luffy watched, Zoro whipped into a Tatsumaki, and as Mr. 1 protected his face from the wind, Zoro moved to one side slightly, then lashed out with his still unfinished distance attack. Both attackers were blown off their feet, the newcomer being cut several dozen times across his chest, his weapons shattered.

Mr. 1, however was simply flung backwards to smash bodily into a building. When he pushed himself out of the rubble, however, it was evident that he was still uninjured.

"Huh..." Zoro grunted, shaking his head. "Still not worthy of a name yet, then..."

"Yeah, you got this covered," Luffy said with a laugh. "See you in a bit." Hopping up into the air, he paused, staring down at the odd newcomer, wondering who he was, but then shrugged that minor mystery off and went in search of Nami or Crocodile.

OOOOOOO

Makino leaned back against the wall behind Vivi with Chopper, who stood beside her in his normal form as they watched the young princess work. She was a pretty good organizer, Makino thought, watching as yet another servant ran out the door carrying messages. Despite having been away for a number of years, Vivi had quickly and expertly taken command of the royal forces, restarting the retreat operation that her father had ordered, leaving the search for her father to Chaka. Vivi also ordered the troops to abandon the defensive positions around the capital city's outskirts, which would have given them a good defensive advantage against the rebels.

To do so Vivi had used four men, apparently champions of the Royal Army, to go around and inform everyone in the army what had happened and most importantly about the bomb. Her messengers were randomly chosen and paired with a squad of Marines to boot, to make certain her orders went where they should and were followed up on.

That being said, however, Makino still wasn't very happy about Vivi's personal plan to fly ahead and meet with the rebel army under a flag of truce. She didn't think it would work, not if the rebel army had come this far. But Vivi was certain that they could reach the last rebel army's camp before they started the final march for the city. *And I'm certainly not going to change her mind about it. She might not have given herself the airs of a princess before this, but she certainly has now*, Makino thought ruefully.

Chopper tugged at her legs for a moment, and Makino looked down at the young reindeer. "Yes? You have a question, Chopper?"

"Nothing really, I'm just wondering, how are we going to find all of the Baroque Works agents among the rebels? Those two agents attacked Vivi the moment they saw her, so what's to say the ones among the rebels won't do the same thing?" Chopper asked worriedly.

"I don't know, though Pell could certainly fly them away fast enough if they come under fire. Beyond that, it might be out of our hands," Makino said. "Unless she is thinking of taking the two of us with her, which I am afraid I would not agree to. Being in the air once was enough for me, thank you!"

Chopper quickly backed away as Makino began to mutter under her breath, her fingers twitching at her sides as she imagined the horrors she would visit upon Luffy and Nami when she saw them next. *Makino can be as scary as Doctorine!*

At that point Pell came in, bowing quickly. "Hime-sama, Ms. Makino, Chopper, the army is ready to move south the moment the order is given. Chaka has been fully briefed, and I placed the bomb twelve kilometers to our north, well away from both our line of advance toward Rain Dinners and the rebel's line of advance on Alubarna. I need to get some water, but after that I'll be ready to go. I have also taken the time to prepare a large white flag for our mission."

Vivi stood up brusquely. "Excellent. I think I'll go get changed and meet you in the garden, Pell. I'll need to wear something that the rebels can recognize me in."

"Do you want some help?" Makino asked.

"Yes, please," Vivi said, smiling at the older woman.

"I'll send a few maids to help you on my way to the kitchens," Pell offered.

Vivi nodded at that, and the two women hurried out of the room, with Makino telling Chopper to follow Pell to the kitchen to grab some food of his own. "No offense, but you are still a boy, even if you're not interested in human women."

Chopper agreed readily, following the older Zoan-type user out of the room.

The two women took a few moments to quickly bathe Vivi and had just begun to finish up her hair when the door to Vivi's rooms opened. "The dress is over there, please," Vivi said quickly, not looking up from where she was lacing up her corset. "We're in a bit of a hurry, so if you could quickly undo the laces for us. I hope it will still fit me."

"Of course, princess," said the female voice of the maid, moving over to pick up the dress and begin to prepare it for the blue haired girl.

Something about the voice, however, made Makino turn from where she had just set down a comb, and she watched as the maid suddenly turned around from where she had been looking at the dress and lashing out with a kick towards Vivi. Vivi, however, was head and shoulders above the rest of the Straw Hats when it came to her ability to dodge, even if she had yet to learn Kami-E. Seeing the blow coming in her mirror, she yelped, throwing herself forward into a barrel roll before twisting, looking at the attacker. "What, what are you doing!?"

"A~r~r~a, I'm sorry, little dove, but my orders are to keep you from meeting with your friends in the rebel army!" said the voice of the maid, though this time it didn't sound anything like a woman's as the maid touched her face lightly with one hand.

At the touch the maid's face changed to that of a male with a heavy chin, wearing green eyeliner, red lipstick dabbed lightly on his lips, and makeup in spots on his cheeks to go with a bowl cut of dark green hair, almost the color of Makino's own. Vivi recognized him with a gasp of alarm, backing away quickly. "Mr. 2!"

Mr. 2 nodded happily. "It's always nice to meet a fan!" He became serious then, glaring at her, which on his face looked very odd indeed. "You've done enough damage already, little dove. We can't allow you to meet with the Rebel Army and ruin everything else!"

Vivi backed away hurriedly. Being in her underwear right now, she really did not want to have to fight this...creature...regardless of his known preferences. But Mr. 2 had neglected Makino's presence. The sound of a pistol brought that fact to the fore quickly, and he twisted out of the way at the last second as the musket ball passed, rolling away and turning to take up a stance that looked to Makino like one somewhere between a ballerina's and that of a martial artist's. "Don't even joke~~~! Why does a pretty thing like you have a pistol on you~~?"

Calmly dropping her empty pistol, Makino pulled out a second pistol and then a third from her pouch, cocking them both in her hands as she too took a stance. "Don't mistake me," Makino said coolly. "That was a warning shot. The next few however are going to be aimed at you for real. That accent of yours is making me shudder so much I think I'd want to eliminate you just for that, let alone trying to harm my friend here. Vivi, grab that dress and get out of here! I'll hold this one off."

"A-are you sure?" Vivi asked hesitantly, even while one trying ineffectually to cover herself with her hands. The corset she was wearing did not leave much to the imagination, after all. Even knowing Mr. 2's inclinations, she did not feel comfortable with him looking at her dressed like this.

"Don't even joke~~!" said Mr. 2 once more, quickly flipping himself through the air to land in front of the doorway. "Don't talk as if you're going to get out of here!"

"We're running out of time," Makino said, cocking back both of her pistols' firing mechanisms with her thumbs, sliding one foot forward from the other as she turned to point her side towards Mr. 2. "I'll handle him," she said calmly. "On three..."

Despite saying that Makino's back foot hammered into the ground instantly and she hopped forward with a small Geppo-aided bounce, bringing her pistol around, not in an attempt to actually fire it, as she closed. Instead it came around whipping towards Mr. 2's head. He dodged back, a kick lancing up to catch Makino in the chest, but she redirected it with her other pistol, pushing it to one side, bringing her first pistol around to face the man's chest before firing.

The man dodged to one side once more at the last second, kicking out hard, but she blocked that, shouting, "Tekkai!" and holding up a hand, her own leg sweeping his pivot leg out

from under him. He rolled away, but this freed up the doorway, and Vivi raced through it, as Makino swiftly turned to face Mr. 2. She winced internally, wringing out the hand that had blocked his kick even as she took up a position in the doorway blocking any attempt to race after Vivi.

Mr. 2 growled irritably, glaring at her. "My mission might've been a failure, but don't think you're going to walk out of here either! My Okama-kenpo is invincible!"

"Tell me, is there anything that comes out of your mouth that it isn't going to make me cringe?" Makino asked conversationally, but a moment later she was too busy to exchange quips as Mr. 2 charged her.

OOOOOOO

Vivi pulled on the dress, trying to do up the laces as she ran, though she knew she must look a fright at the moment. *But Makino was right; we're running out of time. I couldn't stay and help her, not now. I just hope that she can hold out until Chopper and Chaka can help her!*

Out in the garden she found the two of them, and both of them looked at her in surprise. "Hime-sama, what's happened!?" Pell asked quickly.

"Mr. 2," Vivi gasped out, whipping around and quickly letting Chopper do up the last of her dress's laces "The, the one I told you about, the one who can appear as if he's other people, he tried to attack me! Makino is holding him off. Chopper, you have toOWHA!"

At that point they were interrupted, the ground underneath the three of them suddenly caving in. Chopper swiftly transformed into his deer mode, and Vivi flung her hands around his neck as the reindeer bounced away. Pell transformed to his hybrid form and simply flapped his wings once, hovering in the air for a moment before moving away from the sudden hole. "What is going on!?"

"GAhh!" Chopper squawked, as something from below the ground grabbed his foot, pulling him away through the ground like it was a fish in a stream. He tried to get loose, but the grip, which was by a set of large claws that looked to Chopper like that of a mole, was irresistible. And with Vivi on his back he couldn't transform

"Mr. 4, we have, have a ball coming in, coming in from the right!" shouted a muffled voice, high pitched and almost as grating on the ears as Mr. 2's in Vivi's opinion.

In the far corner of the garden stood a massive, almost rotund, man. He stood still, not moving very much, but in his hand he held a massive metal bat, almost as big as Vivi was tall. He pulled it off the ground and began to swing it as Chopper and Vivi were carried to him.

"Hime-sama!" Pell shouted, flying towards them. His flight was interrupted, however, as small balls hurtled towards him. Pell dodged at the last minute, and the balls zoomed on, exploding when they impacted the palace wall. *What now!? And how in the world did these three get into the palace gardens in the first place!?*

From another corner of the garden came what looked like some kind of dog, low slung to the ground and with the snout of a dachshund. But while most of its body looked like that of a dog, it also had bits and pieces, particularly around its center, which looked like that of a cannon.

Chopper, however, didn't need Pell's help. Between one moment and the next Chopper had bucked his back up, hurling Vivi into the air before shrinking back into his normal form. The blow from the bat whistled between them as Chopper slipped out of the grip of the person who had grabbed them, rolling away as Vivi did the same, flipping herself twice to land on her feet nearby.

The dog took this moment to fire on all three of them, but before the cannonballs, which were painted like baseballs for some reason, could land, there was a shout, and Hina appeared over the top of the wall of the gardens, one hand thrust forward. From that hand several tiny handcuffs shot out, forming a cage so fine it looked like a net, enveloping the cannonballs. They exploded harmlessly as she landed, retracting the cage into herself. "Hina interested. What precisely is going on here?"

"Baroque Works agents are trying to stop me from heading out to meet with the rebels just as we were worried about!" Vivi replied. "This is the Mr. 4 pair: Mr. 4, his dog, and Ms. Merry Christmas. Be on the lookout for furrows of ground moving towards you; that will be Ms. Merry Christmas. And don't let a blow from Mr. 4 land whatever you do. He's supposedly super strong!"

"You've done a good, excellent, outstanding job of spying on us, but it won't avail you anything, nothing, nothing at all!" said a rather irritating female voice as a woman, or something that looked a little like a woman, poked its head out of the ground. It had dark purple hair in a frizzy afro and a stubby, almost elderly looking face, certainly older than any of the other agents Vivi had seen.

"What the heck is that? It looks like a mutated mole! Hina repulsed," Hina said, recoiling slightly.

"How dare you! This is my normal form!" Ms. Merry Christmas shouted.

"Don't let her looks or his fool you," Vivi cautioned. "They are one of the most dangerous duos in Baroque Works for a reason. They work incredibly well together, and don't forget about their dog!"

"I'll handle this," Hina said calmly, marching forward

"Me too!" Chopper said, transforming from his normal reindeer form into his strong arm form. "Go!" he said, picking up Vivi and hurling her into the air.

Before she could protest this, Pell caught her, flipping around slightly to catch her on his back before he began to gain altitude. From her position on his back Vivi shouted, "We'll be back! Hold the fort down for us! I swear we'll end this!"

The dog and the man began to throw explosive baseballs up at the swiftly ascending falcon, but Hina and Chopper both charged forward, interrupting their fire, with Chopper getting in close so quickly it took Ms. Merry Christmas by surprise, a blow nearly sending Mr. 4 crashing backwards onto his rear.

At the same time Hina's power activated once more, grabbing several baseball explosives out of the air when the dog fired them out from its mouth one after another, twisting around to add a bit more impetus to them. Before the dog could dodge, she had opened the far side of the cage net, letting loose the unexploded ordinance back into its face. The dog squealed in pain as the explosions went off all around it, before falling to the ground, seared and bleeding.

Hina smirked, taking a deep puff from her cigarette before flicking it out, staring at the now glaring Ms. Merry Christmas and Mr. 4. "One down."

Despite their anger at the treatment of their dog, the two of them kept control and attempted to use teamwork against Chopper and his reluctant partner. They did so by first isolating Chopper through the use of several baseball explosives from Mr. 4, with Mrs. Merry Christmas shouting out instructions as she zoomed through the ground below the palace garden, leaving behind several mines in her tunnels which blew up, keeping Hina hopping and unable to attack. After a few minutes the two of them had been separated to either side of the garden. At that point Mrs. Merry Christmas launched herself towards the more dangerous of their two opponents, while Mr. 4 launched several cannon balls towards Chopper to keep him in place.

That proved to be a mistake, as Mr. 1 or his partners would have been able to tell them: always kill the weakest link first. Targeting the strongest simply made the attackers split their own efforts and made them more susceptible to surprise.

When she came close to Hina, she bounced off something hard in the ground, a clanging noise reverberating back down her tunnel as she stared at it. "Wait, cages? Gah, she can shoot those cages down into the ground too!?"

Quickly realizing the danger, she dove down and away, turning and moving out towards Chopper this time. But he had taken the opportunity to close with Mr. 4. Popping her head out

of the ground Ms. Merry Christmas saw this and shouted. "Mr. 4, look out, wake up, incoming, get your bat ready!"

Chopper dodged backwards, letting the massive two-ton bat pass by, then jumped forward once more. Mr. 4, for all his strength, was slow, and Chopper was able to get within his guard. Before the big man could do anything Chopper had changed into his Heavy Point, and two hard punches smashed into Mr. 4's eyes, one after another. As the large agent dropped his bat and quickly raised his hands to his face, Chopper used a move Luffy had taught him, wheeling up and over Mr. 4 and then hammering several blows into his opponent's kidney. The man groaned in pain and began to tip over like a top, and Chopper helped him along by sweeping his legs out from under him.

Then he launched himself in the air, performing a move Luffy had used on Zoro when one of their sparring sessions had devolved into a wrestling match. "Certain Death Gravity Elbow!" he shouted, bringing his elbow down with all the force he could muster right into the lower intestine of his target.

Miss Merry Christmas attempted to close with him, but she had made the mistake of thinking that the underground cage she had banged into had been a defensive technique. "Ground Cage!" Hina shouted from behind her.

A giant cage of steel burst out of the ground between Hina and Chopper, then swiftly began to shrink. It nearly caught Chopper too, with him desperately leaping up and out of it at the last second. The cage continued to shrink, gathering up Ms. Merry Christmas and continuing to shrink until she was trapped within a cage barely a foot larger than she was in every direction.

"Hey, you bastard!" Chopper shouted, shifting back into his normal form and pointing angrily at Hina. "Be more careful with those cage things! You nearly caught me in it too!"

"Ah, and that would have been so bad, of course. Hina regretful," Hina replied, her lips twitching at the mouth at the young-seeming Zoan Fruit user. She marched over to the moaning Mr. 4, binding him with handcuffs from his feet up to his shoulders.

"You... Don't tell me that was deliberate!" Chopper shouted, backing away rapidly as he shrunk down to his normal body.

"Mah, mah, of course not," Hina soothed with a distinct lack of sincerity, picking out a cigarette from her pocket and lighting it up before bringing it to her lips. "It isn't like I have some questions I'd love to ask you about the rumors that brought me here in the first place, or where you and the green-haired girl really come from, and whether or not you are part of a certain irritating pigtailed captain's crew. Hina grimly amused."

"EEEE!" Chopper whimpered, backing away quickly and smacking his back against the garden's outer wall. "D, don't come any closer!"

Hina smirked at him again before turning away, when there was the sound of shattering glass from nearby. She turned to see what Hina thought at first was a random maid fly out of the window to land in the garden. It was only when the figure landed that she and Chopper were able to see that it was in fact a man, albeit one wearing makeup.

"Hina disgusted," Hina muttered, shivering slightly before staring hard at the man, his features bringing to mind a bounty poster.

The man seemed to have been put through the wringer. One arm was hanging loosely at his side, the upper portion of it a mass of black and blue. His face too was marked by what looked like a broken jaw if Hina was any judge. And while still moving gracefully, it was obvious the man was retreating from whoever had done this to him.

A second later Makino leaped out of the same window. She landed lightly, one hand holding the remains of a pistol. She too looked somewhat the worse for wear, her other hand holding her side and one eye closed from a large black and blue mark. Despite that she was obviously now the aggressor, and the normal mild-mannered, kindly look was gone from her face as she stalked toward Mr. 2. "Say that again, I dare you!" she shouted, walking slowly towards the man. "Who's hips are fat, hmm? Whose?"

"Gah, crazy woman!" Mr. 2 shouted in turn despite his broken jaw, looking first at her, then at the others all around the garden. Seeing his accomplices' dire straits and Captain Hina stalking towards him, Mr. 2 turned and leaped up onto the top of the wall. "Until next time, my dears! Au Revoir~~~!"

"Pirate Bon Clay, get back here!" Hina bellowed, leaping after him.

"What an irritating fellow. Still, quite an intelligent one too," Makino said, her voice going back to normal between one second and the next the second Hina was out of sight. "Hello, Chopper. I see you've had an interesting time of it too."

"Ahh! You're injured, you're injured! Doctor, Doctor!" Chopper shouted, running around in circles for a bit.

"I do believe you are the doctor, aren't you? As for these injuries, they aren't much of anything, really. Don't worry," Makino soothed. Despite having said that she made no move to stop Chopper as he began to bandage her up..

"What, what did you mean, 'that guy's intelligent?'" Chopper asked distractedly. Makino's ribs were merely bruised, not cracked, thankfully, but she had taken a nasty blow to

the side of her head right over her eye, which had obviously hit her before she could activate Tekkai.

"Hmm? Oh, he's just willing to recognize reality when it kicks his rear in. And willing to make deals to save himself and his original crew. I'll tell you and Luffy about that later," she replied, staring off into the distance. "But for the two of us, I suppose our part in this drama is over. It's now up to Luffy and Vivi to do their parts."

OOOOOOO

With the white banner flying behind them, Vivi and Pell zoomed through the air, with the Princess clutching the back of the falcon Zoan's neck as she held on for dear life. "Pell, do you think this will work?" Vivi said in a small, almost weak voice. She knew what she had shouted a moment ago, what she had said all along about her chances of stopping the rebels from attacking Alubarna. But now that it came to it she was suddenly very worried.

Staring ahead of them at the mass of dust the column of rebels were making as they marched towards the capital city, Pell replied honestly, knowing that Vivi would much prefer that to empty platitudes. "I think it is our best chance to keep the bloodshed from escalating further, Your Highness. Whether or not it will work I don't know. Know, however, that I stand with you, whatever else happens."

"Thank you, Pell," Vivi said, smiling down at him. She wanted to loosen her arms for a moment in order to throw them around him for a hug, but at the speed they were going and with one of her hands holding the white flag, that just wasn't going to happen.

A moment later they were seen from the ground, and musket balls began to fly up towards them. Pell was, after all, known as the chief guard of the royal family, the most dangerous warrior in Alabasta. However, they were so high up the musket balls couldn't reach before falling down to the ground. Luckily they were ahead of the army rather than directly over it, or else those firing might well have hurt themselves or other people.

*While kind of funny in a morbid sort of way, that would not have been conducive to my mission here,* Vivi thought, as Pell began to descend slowly in wide turns around the front of the Rebel Army. The army slowly halted, more and more people staring up at the waving white flag flying behind the two figures above them.

Someone down below put a megaphone to their mouth and shouted, "Pell, are you here to surrender? Or switch sides at last?"

When Pell made to open his mouth, Vivi released the hand holding onto his neck feathers to place it over the top of his beak. At the same time she shouted, "My name is Nefeltari Vivi, and I am here to speak to your leader, Kohza!"

"Vivi!?" shouted the voice, and this time she smiled, recognizing it as that of her friend. "We thought you were dead! Where have you been the last two years?!"

"That is what we need to talk about!" she shouted back. "But I would rather not shout at the top of my voice for so long, so if we could have your word that you will abide by the flag of truce, we will come down."

Pell continued to fly around the front of the army, which continued to gradually come to a halt as units in the back piled up into the ones in front. A conversation seemed to be going on down there from what Pell could make out with his hawk eyes, but he could not hear what was being said. It looked, he told Vivi, as if there were two sides, with one side wanting to shoot them out of the air if the gun waving was any indication, and he assumed the others wanted to give them safe passage.

Finally Kohza raised his megaphone back to his mouth and shouted up, "Land a little ways ahead of the army. I will meet you there with my officers. No tricks, Vivi! Whatever our past, you are still the daughter of the abuser, Cobra. I can't protect you if you abuse the flag of truce."

Pell bristled, but a sharp rap to the back of his head caused him to keep his beak shut. "Let me do the talking, please, Pell?" she said, waiting until he nodded before raising her voice. "I understand! And again, that is part of what we must talk about."

A few seconds later the two of them waited nervously for Kohza and the others to arrive. "Kohza," Vivi said, smiling at her friend happily despite the tenseness of the moment, and then she went around and nodded to the others she recognized. That was about half of them, she was happy to see. The others did not look nearly as friendly, and Vivi had to stop herself from scowling as she noticed that all of the rebels were still armed.

One of her old friends, however, laid his rifle on the desert floor before sitting down and looking up at her with a smirk, shaking his head. "The gang's all here again."

"The circumstances are very different, however," Kohza said, frowning heavily at Vivi and making no move to join his friend in sitting down. "Are you here to surrender? You have never been implicated in your father's crimes, Vivi, despite having disappeared for two years. We can grant you asylum, and you too, Pell, if you're willing to step aside."

Pell once more growled angrily, one hand were dropping to his sword. "How dare you insinuate that I would ever, that Cobra-sama would ever!"

But Vivi quickly moved forward, placing a hand on his chest and forcing the proud warrior back. "We're not here to either surrender or seek asylum. We're here to talk. I give myself and Pell over to you as hostages for our good conduct for the moment, but you must **listen** to me!"

Kohza stared at her, then over at Pell, then over Pell's shoulder towards the capital city, then back to Vivi. "All right, you have a few minutes," he said simply. "But you better use it well."

Vivi opened her mouth, but before she could speak a shot rang out, and she collapsed sideways as a musket ball hit her side. Kohza whirled around, glaring at one of his officers, who was smirking at him.

Another shot rang out, as well as a shout. "Kohza and his accomplices have gone over to the Royals!" shouted another officer, and for a moment all was chaos.

Kohza and his friends, however, were better fighters than the other few officers there, and put them down quickly even as the rest of the army surged forward. Kohza grabbed up his megaphone and shouted orders, but still more shots were fired towards Vivi. Pulling his sword out of one of the traitors, Pell hurled his body over her as the shots continued to run out.

Even as Vivi gasped, trying to scrabble at her own wound underneath him, Pell grunted as a few bullets hit him as well. But he was a Zoan-type. Regardless of their form, Zoan types were far tougher than normal humans, and while the bullets were painful, they were not life threatening all on their own. He glanced down at Vivi and saw her smiling weakly up at him, blood in her mouth. "W, well, at least this way we know who the Baroque Works agents are..."

"Not the way I would have preferred to learn that, Vivi-hime." Pell grunted as another bullet musket ball hit him, but a moment later there was silence,.

A second later one of her old friends came forward, pausing as the falcon turned his proud head to glare at him, murder eloquent in his eyes. The man, the same overweight man who had tried to make a joke before, held up his hands. "Pell, we think it's safe now. We have some medical supplies left. Let us look at Vivi."

After a second Pell's glare subsided, and he jumped off of Vivi, letting the man move to help her.

'What, what the hell is going on?' Kohza muttered, staring at the officer who had shouted about him betraying his own cause, the cause he had started. "This, I've known Veger for years. He's been our chief logistics leader practically since the rebellion began! I know some of these other men just as well," he said, gesturing towards the other people who had attacked Vivi and the others. "They're not, they're not..."

"Killers or spies?" Pell asked tartly,. He moved past Kohza, pushing him aside roughly to grab the would-be assassin Kohza had called Veger. Dragging his body up, he ripped off his shirt, pointing out a tattoo on the inside of his arm. "Your Highness, is that the mark of Baroque Works?"

"I, it is," Vivi said somewhat weakly, before clenching her teeth as her old friends, Okame and Natto, began to patch her up as best they could. Both of them had been wounded lightly during the short, sharp fight, but they hadn't been shot, at least something Okame, a thin, slightly older girl with short cropped black hair commented cheerfully, actually winking at Vivi.

"Baroque Works?" Kohza asked. He had not, seemingly, taken any offense at being pushed aside by Pell, though that was a near thing from the narrowing of his eyes. He looked at the tattoo, then back to Vivi, speaking slowly, as if he was barely keeping control. "You were trying to say something earlier... And they didn't want you to say it. What the hell is going on!" he said, repeating himself from a moment before. "And what does this have to do with your father going insane and attacking his own people?"

Licking her bloody lips, Vivi began to speak. Given that last comment, she started by telling her friends about Mr. 2 and his powers, then explained about Baroque Works and what she had been doing for the last three years.

It took a while, but by the time she was finished Kohza and her former friends were looking at one another, shaking their heads. Natto didn't seem as if he really believed her, as did a few of the others, but Okame, judging by the gentle hug she was giving Vivi, did.

"We are..." Kohza began, looking around and noting the expressions of his friends. "I want to believe you, Vivi, it is for no other reason than our old friendship, but this is, this is impossible! You expect us to believe the last four years of our revolution has, has been a tool, that we've been tools of, of Crocodile, of all people? He's a hero!"

"He isn't a hero. He is a mad, ambitious **bastard!**" Vivi gasped out, the musket ball being removed from her side by a doctor as she spoke. Pell had moved to stand behind the man, his blade out and ready just in case of further betrayal. Yet even injured as she was, Vivi made certain to keep any mention of Crocodile's real goal out of her words. "He, Crocodile has a goal. He wants to rule this island, lock, stock, and barrel, and he would've wiped both sides of this conflict out!"

"Pell?" Kohza asked, looking over at the falcon Zoan, his earlier anger gone. He knew Pell couldn't, wouldn't lie to save his life, and there were at least a few parts of Vivi's story he could corroborate.

Pell remained silent, glaring around at the rebels, still in his half falcon form, his hands claws as one of them held his sword. Looking down at the princess, however, his body language softened noticeably. "Yes?"

"Where did you leave that bomb?"

"From here?" Pell looked around for a moment, then pointed northwest of the capital city away. "Several kilometers out that way." Looking back he caught Kohza's eyes meaningfully. "It was big enough to blow up the entire capital city and everyone within it."

"That doesn't mean anything," objected one of the others. "That could've just been a way to wipe us out if they knew we were winning, taking us with them."

"How low do you think my Lord Cobra would go!?" said Pell angrily, moving to stride towards the man. "How dare you speak such slander of the king!"

"Pell," Vivi barked, reaching up to grab his leg, wincing as she did. As Pell stopped, she too looked at the man angrily, one of only two there she didn't recognize. "My father would never condone such a thing. I understand why you think he would: Mr. 2's powers and Crocodile's plans have turned you against my family for years, and vice versa. All I ask is that you wait. My father is missing; he has been kidnapped by someone under Crocodile's orders. That bomb was placed by Crocodile's orders. And we have people in place attacking Crocodile, searching for more evidence. With that evidence in hand, and with what just happened here, will you believe us?"

Kohza stared at her, his mind whirling. "But if this was true, if this is true, what, what we been fighting for!?"

"You've been fighting for a lie," Pell said, his voice somber but soothing and almost commiserating. "But it is not a lie of your own creation. Nor is it your fault you believed the lie. It will only start to become your fault if you turn away from the truth. If you refuse this chance to turn aside."

Kohza stared at him, then down at Vivi, and then around at his officers, taking a survey of their opinions without need for words. "We will wait," he said simply, "until the Marines you say are in Alubarna come out with this evidence. Until then, the two of you will be our prisoners. You said you were our prisoners in return for good conduct. I'm taking you up on that, Vivi."

Vivi stared at him, then nodded. She had done all she could. Now it was on Luffy's shoulders and the others to do what she prayed they could.

OOOOOOO

While hopping around above the town Luffy turned, dodging a hook that seemed to come out of nowhere, attached to a man standing on a nearby rooftop. As he watched, the hook moved back to the man, the stream of sand connecting it to his body solidifying as he pulled it back, until it merged and joined the rest of his body, its appearance changing at the same time. "Yo, Crocodile," Luffy quipped, even as his face shut down a bit as he eyed the

Shichibukai seriously, getting a similar look in turn while Luffy alighted down onto the roof. "Just the man I was looking for."

"So, you are Straw Hat Luffy. Without your straw hat, I see," Crocodile said, then without another word launched an attack at Luffy. "Desert Spada!" His hand forming into a blade of sand, he lashed it into the roof. Where it entered, the blade then extended into a wave, cutting into the roof like a hot knife through butter as it slashed towards Luffy.

For his part, Luffy leaped back into the air, shouting out, "Rankyaku!" Unlike the vast majority of the attacks Luffy had used on Smoker, these were all sharp, but that didn't seem to matter much. Even as his own attack carved into the ground between him and Luffy, Crocodile raised a hand, creating a shield of sand which absorbed most of Luffy's attacks. One of them got through, but sliced harmlessly through Crocodile's shoulder as it and his upper body turned into sand.

Crocodile slowly reformed, now glaring at Luffy, who was hopping in midair a few yard above and to the side of his position. "I see you are going to make this difficult." Despite his blasé tone, there was nothing blasé about the look he fixed Luffy with as he launched another attack. "Sables Pesado!"

A massive wave of sand lashed out from his hand towards Luffy, who grimaced and dodged, unwilling to see what would happen if he took that kind of hit even with Tekkai. Before Luffy could launch his own attack, Crocodile had crossed the distance between them, his golden hook slashing out and the other hand reaching forward to grab.

Luffy's own hands blurred, the crack of the sound barrier being broken, lashing out like a Gatling gun as he launched air punches at short range, blowing Crocodile into sand fragments. But even so he had to dodge and keep dodging as Crocodile reformed portions and parts of his body attacking in turn. *Okay, so air pressure attacks don't do anything against Croc's sand form. Makes sense, I suppose. Sand is a solid, smoke isn't. Rankyakus won't work either then. That leaves Busoshoku and my jutte.*

With that thought between one punch and the next one of Luffy's hands flared into black for a moment as one caught Crocodile's reforming forearm. Crocodile had recognized it in the barest millisecond and twitched his arm away, even though he couldn't quite change the arm back to a diffuse form quickly enough. The Shichibukai grimaced in pain, but even in his merely human body he was tough and got out of it with only the beginning of a nasty bruise rather than a broken bone.

In retaliation he caught Luffy by the neck with his hook and hurled him down towards the ground. Many of Crocodile's attacks, particularly his long range ones, worked better through the ground, so he needed to keep Luffy out of the air. He followed this up with a shout of, "Barjan!"

Luffy flipped so that his feet were under him as he touched down very briefly on the ground, kicking up and to the side as he launched some more sharp Rankyakus Crocodile's way. They all hit Crocodile's reformed upper body scattering him but doing no damage. That hadn't been Luffy intention though. He had simply wanted to stop Crocodile from attacking him again.

Looking at the ground where Crocodile's last attack had hit, he winced, noticing that the area looked cracked and almost drained of moisture. *Okay, so watch out for that kind of attack. Can he do that to people? Best not to find out, not even Haki could defend against that kind of thing.*

Even though his body hadn't reformed this moment of hesitation had given Crocodile time to launch another attack. "SABLES!" A massive sandstorm appeared around the area before condensing under Crocodile's command and launching itself at Luffy.

"Tekkai!" Luffy shouted, just as the small sandstorm struck, sending him flying as the sand within it tried to cut at his body. After a few seconds though he was able to regain enough control to lash out in all directions with air pressure attacks, dissipating the whirlwind. He found himself out in the desert beyond the town, frowning as he realized that Crocodile had brought him out here deliberately.

Crocodile reformed himself out of the sand particles of the whirlwind, frowning internally as he stared up at Luffy in the air. "You think you can stay safe from me in the air, Mugiwara? Desert Grande Espada!"

From right below and to every side of Luffy, several dozen blades of sand erupted, so fast that again Luffy had no chance to dodge. "Tekkai!" he shouted again, lashing out ahead of himself with another air pressure punch.

The punch took Crocodile in the face, blasting it apart into sand while Luffy took his enemy's attacks wincing but coming through it with bruises already healing rather than missing limbs. But a second later he launched himself forward, getting in close before Crocodile could realize he had. Two Haki infused punches landed smashing into Crocodile's upper chest.

But even without a head Crocodile was aware of what was going on around him to a limited degree, and his fist lashed out, sending out blades made of sand that cut into Luffy's body. Even without Tekkai though Luffy was far tougher than most, and he took the attacks, lashing out with another Haki infused punch.

This one, however, Crocodile anticipated and he pulled his body out and away from the punch, making a circle in his stomach to let it through before reforming around it. "Desert Encierro!"

His limited Observation Haki screaming a warning, Luffy kicked off the desert floor with both feet, pulling his arm out at the same time, his kick off the ground giving him enough

impetus to pull his arm out before it was engulfed. Rolling he kicked up into the air, scowling as he stared down at Crocodile, who had just reformed his head and body and was glaring up at him. One hand touched his chest and side, where he knew he had broken bones right now from those Haki infused punches.

*Damn it, this rookie is as dangerous as I feared. Curse Haki and all who use it! And his ability to keep in the air does limit how I can attack him. Or it would, if we weren't in a desert! Crocodile thought, spitting out blood to one side. Still, I can't be complacent even here. Busoshoku can let him end this fight if I do.*

For his part Luffy was staring back at Crocodile just as seriously. *Can't hurt him with my long range attacks, not even my ki attacks unless I'm willing to break out the Sealed techniques, which I'm not unless I start losing this fight badly. Can't get close without running the risk of his own. Kami-E doesn't work very well against his attacks, but Tekkai does to a limited extent, and I think I'm giving him fits by staying in the air. And his speed isn't quite up to my own either. My Jutte could be of use though I will have to use it carefully.*

For a moment the battlefield was still as the two of them looked at one another. Then Crocodile spoke. "I don't understand. You take in that conniving woman and you also fight for this country. Why? What did Nico Robin promise you; what lie did she feed you? And why are you involved with Nefeltari Vivi, or this country at all? What do you have to gain by all this?"

"I'm not here to gain anything. I'm fighting you for my friend Vivi," Luffy replied promptly, glaring at him. "As for Robin, she never promised me anything, nor did she lie to me. I'm not fighting you for her at all, except as a sort of secondary thing."

Twitching at that, Crocodile sneered. "All this for friendship? Are you a fool?"

"Meh, I've said before it takes a special kind of crazy to want to become the Pirate King, so maybe," Luffy shrugged, his eyes never leaving Crocodile's, watching them narrow and become even more angry than before. "But Vivi, she's a different kind of fool you know. She tried to talk us out of helping her, out of confronting you, saying we had done enough to get her here. Vivi would have done so herself. That kind of courage, it can't be stopped, and it would've gotten her killed. So, here I am, fighting in her place."

"...You..." Crocodile seemed incandescent with anger for some reason, his rage rolling off him in waves of heat. Why he was suddenly so angry Luffy couldn't say though. "You fucking fool. You, you seduce Nico Robin to your side, you fight **me**, a Shichibukai, for such a stupid reason!?"

With a snarl Crocodile threw off his coat and began to rise in the air, his lower body slowly disappearing into tiny motes of sand. Luffy had a brief moment to realize that this allowed the rest of him to somehow skim along above the ground before Crocodile attacked

him, his hands flashing into multiple curved blades of sand. "You're just another fucking rookie with too large a dream! Let me show you the reality of this sea!"

OOOOOOO

The three way fight between the injured Nami, Tashigi, and Ms. Doublefinger was not an even contest from the get go. Tashigi couldn't quite get through Ms. Doublefinger's spikes to do any real damage, and she was too fast and too quick for the BW agent to hurt her in turn.

Nami was the odd girl out. Not fast enough to dodge with her wounded leg, she had to keep circling around the main fight, using spurts of Kami-E whenever one of the other two targeted her, but the pressure this put on her wounded ankle was such that she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. On the other hand, while her clubs couldn't do a lot of damage, their blunt type of damage could get through Ms. Doublefinger's spikes more easily, smashing them flat with every hit.

As Luffy and Crocodile started their battle, all three women were battered and bleeding from their own, but it was Nami, with her punctured ankle, that was the closest to collapse. *Damn it, I need an edge, something to turn the tide! But what, what can I...*

Just then she spotted it, a forgotten pistol on the ground nearby, dropped by one of the BW agents. Elsewhere the fight between the marines and BW agents was slowing down, though there were no marines nearby save Tashigi at present. The BW agents in the area where their battle had taken place resembled the section of the town which Luffy, Zoro, and Nami had first come into, with bodies of the agents scattered around dead or unconscious.

But the important thing right now was that the gun in question looked as if it hadn't been fired. And whatever else, Ms. Doublefinger was not durable enough to take a musket ball in that exposed gut of hers. Nami was feeling a mite vindictive about the hole the purple-haired woman had punched through her ankle.

Dodging back from a slash of Tashigi's sword, Nami shouted, "Kami-E!" and began to dodge, trying to push herself in the direction of the pistol. The two other women didn't notice, nor had they taken the time to realize how much pain that technique should put Nami in. They were too busy trying to carve bits off of one another, and somewhat succeeding too.

Not that with her injured ankle Nami's Kami-E was perfect. Indeed, her attempts to control her movement towards the pistol actually worked against the dodging technique. She took several small cuts and slashes from both of the other girls before she had moved around them enough to be in lunging range of the gun.

When she did so, she launched herself forward into a roll, crying out in pain as she put more power into her ankle as she did, but coming out of the roll with the pistol in hand. She turned, and before either other girl could realize what had happened, the pistol flashed.

Ms. Doublefinger gasped, one of her heavily muscled, spike marked hands dropping to her stomach. The bullet actually hadn't penetrated very far. Her use of her doping power had given her body almost the durability Tekkai did, but not quite. The musket ball however had done some damage, and blood was now pouring down her side.

Before she could recover, Tashigi slashed out, the flat of her blade sliding between several of her opponent's protective spikes to crash into her neck, one of the few areas the doping hadn't visibly effected. Like Tashigi had hoped, this meant that the woman's body was weaker there. The blow smashed Ms. Doublefinger sideways, and she crashed into the wall of a house to one side of where the fight had been occurring.

As one enemy slumped unconscious to the ground, Tashigi turned. "And now for you, miss. You're coming with GAH!"

Nami had, instead of running, closed with Tashigi, remembering something that Zoro had said about the sword-wielding Marine woman. Before Tashigi could even recover from the blow she had dealt Ms. Doublefinger, Nami was in her face, one hand flashing out not in a punch, but a grab, as she leaped past.

Rolling and biting her lip to keep from screaming, Nami came to her feet, hobbling away as quickly as she could while her shoulder, the one she had landed on when rolling to retrieve the pistol, added its own sound to the melody of pain going through her. "Sorry, Tashigi, but I really don't want to fight you! You'll find your glasses on a barrel by the end of the street!"

"Ahh, wait! Get back here! You're under arrest!" Tashigi shouted, racing in the direction of the voice for a few steps before stumbling, nearly losing her grip on her sword. The blind-as-a-bat Marine scowled, pushing herself to her feet as she moved forward much more slowly, not seeing the orange blob she had heretofore been looking for. "Darn it!"

Breathing a sigh of relief, Nami turned following the small alleyway between two large buildings away from the road she had heretofore been following. *I am going to have a long... talk... with my captain about this whole getting me real combat experience thing. Right after I see Chopper anyway. And if I never see that marine girl again it will be too soon!*

OOOOOOO

Robin snuck along a hallway around two stories underground of the rest of the casino, a hidden area that even the majority of the casino's workers and Crocodile's BW agents never saw. Here were the rooms devoted to the communication Mushis, the meeting rooms, supplies, and the money Crocodile had funneled into his Baroque Works operations.

And somewhere in here was the evidence they needed to stop the war in its tracks. While that aspect really didn't matter to her, it would, as Luffy had said, get them on the king's good side, and that, at this point, she did care about a lot.

Moving out of one storage room, she shook her head, then began to make her way back to the staircase, which could take her further down into the next level. As she was about to step onto the staircase, however, a mass of green goo shot down from the upper level of the stairwell, enveloping her chest before she could blink. It rose up to her throat and solidified there into a band of solid green, choking her as it began to draw her upwards. Her hands pounded futilely at it, but Robin wasn't strong enough to break the candy mass once it solidified like this.

She soon found herself face to face with Gasparde, who smirked evilly at her, his eyes raking up and down her form as she hung in the air in front of him, the green mass around her throat slowly reforming into one of his hands to match the rest of the greenish mass which had lashed out towards her a second ago. "Ah, there you are, little mouse. Still scurrying around? I'd say that shows a remarkable amount of determination, but I can't say much about your survival instincts."

The large man held the somewhat tall Robin in the air effortlessly, turning her this way and that, his mouth forming into a whistle. "Hmm, well, I can see one other reason to keep you around despite the knowledge Crocodile wants. Heh. And he's nowhere in sight, too. So, how about you tell me all about this Pluton weapon? If you do that, maybe we can both get what we want instead of CrocooOOGH!"

That was as far as Gasparde got before a kick took him in the side of the face and sent him flying to smash into the far wall. Through his shock at actually being hit by a physical blow like that, Gasparde looked up to see the same pirate that had been with Robin before.

He now stood where Gasparde had previously been standing, gently helping Robin to her feet, Gasparde's grip around her throat having been broken by his shock at the attack. "Go on, my fair lady! This one is all mine. The day someone made out of food can truly beat a chef is the day I hang up my knives."

Robin nodded, rubbing her throat and angry that there was little she could do to help him. "Good luck, cook-san," she said before racing off, heading around the corridor and out of sight, deeper into Rain Dinners.

By this point Gasparde had recovered, and his arms turned into large needles, which he shot forward like so many spears. Sanji, however, kicked them away, then began to stomp on one of them, using it to run towards the candy man. It was as he did so that Gasparde noticed there seemed to be something on his feet, some kind of white dust scattered all over his shoes and lower legs. He barely dodged a kick that would've smashed into his face, but couldn't dodge the second one, which sent him careening into a wall. He splattered there before pulling his body back together, one hand moving up to rub his face and nose, which even after reforming looked bruised. "How, how are you doing this?!"

"What, you've never met someone who can hit you before? That's sort of sad. I would've thought the chefs of the Grand Line would know how to deal with upstart condiments like you! Sorry to say, none of my crew seem to be all that interested in candy, otherwise I'd jar and pickle you. As it is, I'm just going to have to put you down for harming the glorious Robin-chan!" Sanji shouted, racing forward and roaring out the last few words, literal fire in his eyes as he did.

Gasparde grunted in pain, then gestured with his hands. They again changed into massive lances of green candy, followed rapidly by far more lances coming from the rest of his body, filling the hallway with spikes as he shot towards Sanji.

Sanji replied by flipping onto his hands and beginning to kick out rapidly, shouting "anti-manner kick course!" Each kick slammed into a different spike, shattering it. Some of them got through, of course, cutting into Sanji here and there, and one of them impacted his head, though thankfully its tip had been shattered, along with the spear of green glop about halfway down its length. It hit with enough power to make Sanji see stars, but lacked any penetration, and Gasparde couldn't control the splattered bits and pieces of his candy body enough to change that at the last instant.

Seeing the bits and pieces of shattered spears starting to move again, Sanji, bloody forehead and all, pushed off of the ground up to the rooftop. Kicking off of it, he dove down towards Gasparde at speed, feet first. "Flying Mutton Shot!"

This time Gasparde tried to capture the cook's legs, softening his body while also retaining his human form. To his shock, however, Sanji was able to pull his feet back out and flipp up and away before pulling out some kind of small ball filled with white dust. This he threw into the air where he kicked it twice with his feet, covering both his shoes with more white dust. An instant later he slammed them both into Gasparde's face before he could dodge again.

This, however, let Gasparde cover Sanji's hands in the green candy, which hardened into the density of steel, trapping his hands within it. Sanji grunted out, "Tekkai," as Gasparde reeled himself in towards the chef, again his entire body transforming so that spikes of hardened candy appeared everywhere, facing towards Sanji.

*It's like fighting the Blob, Sanji thought, grunting as the spikes impacted, not breaking his skin but rather raking across him. Guh! I've found one weakness, what about another one of the original Blob? Damn it, think!*

Gasparde hadn't been able to get up enough momentum to break Sanji's iron body technique, and Sanji brought his legs down, thumping them hard in an overhead kick crescent kick to the back of Gasparde's head. Gasparde reeled away, groaning in agony as he clutched his head, his attention diverted as he accidentally pulled all of the green gunk into his body

again. This freed Sanji's arms, and he rolled away for a second while hurling several small balls filled with white powder at the man.

They impacted, bursting open as they did, and Gasparde coughed, reeling away slightly as he muttered, "What is this!"

"Flour, you shitty moron!" Sanji shouted, before he quickly flung his lit cigarette into the cloud of flour around Gasparde's head. There was a small explosion as fire flickered all over Gasparde's head, quickly spreading from the flour to his body, which was, it seemed, rather flammable.

Gasparde screamed, batting at his body, trying to put the fire out and failing. He was still trying to when a Mutton Shot slammed with steel crushing force into Gasparde's chest, blowing him back and out the door behind him.

The pirate captain wasn't even able to roll with the punch as desperate he was to stop burning. An instant later he skipped out into the lake by the casino. The water, thankfully for the pirate, put out the fire, but as a Devil Fruit user, Gasparde lost the ability to move his body when it was immersed in water. He quickly began to sink.

Sanji stopped, staring at the lake as several banianana circled him. While Sanji was still watching they then began to attack the Devil Fruit user, tearing him into pieces. "Well," he said after a moment, putting a new cigarette to his mouth. "At least they don't have to worry about candy rotting their teeth."

OOOOOOO

"Sparkling Daisy!" Mr. 1 shouted, his joined hands opening with a violent move of his arms, the blades of his fingers and palms slashing at Zoro. So powerful was the attack it sent cutting shockwaves through the air as well that sliced both Zoro and the wall of the building behind him, creating perfect slashes through the stone.

Zoro's Tekkai had helped offset some of the damage to him, but not all. He grunted as the blades cut into his skin, slicing here and there into his stomach and chest. "Grah!" *Damn it, I can't hurt him, but he sure as hell can hurt me.*

That had been the story of the fight since he had taken out that weird interloper with the 'X' on his face. Zoro was a better swordsman. He could push Mr. 1 around, block his attacks, even hurl him away a few times. But he couldn't actually hurt him. The swords Mr. 1 was made of were steel, not iron, and Zoro had yet to make the leap between the two. In return, his Tekkai had been able to dampen down the wounds he would otherwise have taken to about a fifth of the punch. What would have been debilitating had become the equivalent of scratches.

He could feel his swords becoming angrier and angrier as the fight went on, their well-smelted, caringly crafted steel hammering into a man who dared believe he was their equal in temper. The anger of swords was a very odd feeling, but not a distracting one given Zoro's exercises with the cursed Sendai Kitetsu, though it was still annoying.

"Atomic Spar!" Mr. 1 shouted, slicing his hands, open with his fingers once more turned into swords, towards Zoro.

"Oni-Giri!" Zoro shouted, meeting the attack with his own, smashing most of the attack to either side even as some of the attacks bled through to cut at his body. Since he was moving, Tekkai wasn't an option, and it hurt much worse than previous attacks. His attack broken, Zoro was flung backwards to crash back first into a building.

Mr. 1 didn't let up, popping out blades on his feet and moving forward swiftly as if they were skates while his hands and arms remained in blade form. "Atomic Spurt!"

Zoro reared out of the rubble of the building, his body bloody from several slashes around the chest and shoulders, growling as he stared at the incoming sword-man and knowing that he was seeing his death coming for him. Then something clicked, deep inside him. His connection to Wado Ichimonji cranked up to a new level as he felt calm, almost as if he was meditating. *I can hear it, the beat of steel...the pulse of the world. And anything that exists, that beats...can be cut.*

Dropping both his other swords for a moment despite the growl of indignation from the cursed Sendai Kitetsu, he slowly sheathed Wado at his side, closing his eyes. *Breath in the life of the world around you, feel the thing you want to cut, then strike...*

Mr. 1 saw this and frowned. "So you have given up? Very well, I will make this quick!" He shouted, and lashed out with his arms.

"Itoru-iai, Shish-son-song!" Zoro intoned, leaping forwards as Mr. 1 reached him, Wado coming out of its sheath in an instant before being sheathed as Zoro passed Mr. 1's position.

An instant later blood burst out from Mr. 1's chest in a diagonal from hip to shoulder as he slowly turned his head to look at Zoro. "We...well struck. So, so you can cut steel now; what, what's next? Diamond?"

"That would be a waste. Perhaps water next?" Zoro said, turning to stare at his former opponent.

"Heh, very true..." With that Mr. 1 fell to his knees before collapsing forward to land on his face, overcome by the pain of his wound.

Clipping Wado to his side, Zoro picked up his other two blades, sheathing them in turn before pulling off his bandana and taking stock of himself. He was wounded and battered, sure, but still good to go for more, nowhere nearly as wounded as he was against Mihawk. *So, where to go from here?*

Before he could think further on that score, Nami's voice interrupted him. "Oy, Zoro, you finished too?"

"Too? Where the hell have you even been, you sneak thief!?" Zoro shouted back, moving over to the orange-haired girl and wincing somewhat at the massive bruises the girl had on her shoulder and ribs. There was also a wound on her ankle, which looked as if someone had punched a nail right through it. "What the heck happened to you?"

"Ran into Ms. Doublefinger," Nami replied, waving one hand over Zoro's shoulder towards the downed man. "I also ran into your girlfriend and let me tell you, does not have a logical bone in her body! You'd think the idea of teaming up against the most dangerous opponent would have been common sense, but nooo!"

"Yeah, I can see that. Still, let's get out of here for now. Which way is this casino place?" Zoro said, looking a little panicked before pausing as part of what Nami said registered. "And she's not my girlfriend!"

Nami chuckled at that, leaning into Zoro and using him as a crutch as she directed him.

**OOOOOOO**

Luffy dodged a blow from Crocodile and then had to flinch backwards further as his hand tried to grasp Luffy's shoulder. Sand continued to swirl around them, cutting into Luffy's skin as a portion of Crocodile's attention was kept on moving it around, almost to the level of a sand storm. Even through his body's normal level of durability Luffy felt it, opening up small gashes here and there.

But none of those wounds mattered overmuch so long as Luffy was able to keep away from the strange water-draining attack the Suna-Suna Devil Fruit user had somehow developed. He threw out another Busoshoku enhanced punch, only to watch Crocodile reform his body elsewhere, dodging it entirely. The bastard was just barely able to keep up with Luffy's speed and immediately seemed able to notice which punches were reinforced and which weren't, and he simply moved out of the way of the Haki infused punches.

Luffy had tried twice to also use his jutte. But again Crocodile had dodged around the point of the jutte that was seastone, and reformed his body around it, nearly pulling it out of Luffy's hands. And when Luffy did try to pull the seastone through his reforming body he had instead come apart. The same went with Amiguriken level speeds, whenever Luffy tried a speed attack Croc would throw up a wall of hard sand between them which would slow his attack just

enough to get out of the way. *Bastard has to have some skill in Observation, even if it isn't very much. Fucker!*

Like Luffy, Crocodile was bleeding in a few places and was also holding his side gingerly. Luffy had gotten in several hard Busoshoku punches, and he knew that a few of Crocodile's ribs were broken at the very least. But the bastard was **tough**. And he seemed to be gaining more speed and energy as the fight went on, as if he was getting back into fighting form after taking it easy for too long.

Even as he watched, Crocodile twitched away from another attack, then began to launch his Sables attacks at Luffy where he was still standing in midair. Luffy dodged some and countered others with his own air attacks, but he couldn't dodge them all this time, and one of them slammed into him from below, flipping Luffy end over end. Before he could right himself Crocodile was on him, zooming forward on a cloud of sand and slamming a hand down toward Luffy's chest.

Luffy dodged at the last second, rolling around on the on the ground of the desert as spikes appeared everywhere, cutting into him. At the same time something almost sliced into his eye, cutting his forehead badly despite his body's abnormal toughness. It only took a moment for Luffy to realize that it hadn't been a spike, but rather the hook in Crocodile's hand.

"Hahahaha!" Crocodile laughed, pulling the hook back to him, laughing now even as his other hand moved to his side. "You've given me a good fight, Mugiwara! My proverbial hat is off to you! But now it's over! That poison is from the desert snake! A bare scratch can kill an adult elephant in under a minute! You're dead, even if you're still standing upright for now."

"That's right, you bastard," Luffy said, huffing slightly, a smirk on his face despite that. "I'm still standing. And as for your little poison, I guess that just means I'll have to beat you in under a minute!"

Luffy charged forward, his hands turning black up to the elbows, but Crocodile simply stood, smacking his blows aside with his own hands and feet or dodging them as need be, waiting for the poison to do its work. In reply Luffy used his own attacks to remain in the air, no longer using Geppo in favor of staying close and using his legs offensively. Several blows hit home during this time for no return, causing Crocodile to grimace, and after a moment as Luffy continued to press him hard Crocodile began to scowl.

"Heh, I told you, Robin's part of my crew now!" Luffy caroled. "She knew about that little surprise of yours and gave me the antidote earlier! You and your plans, all of your tactics and underhanded tricks, bring them on! I'll beat your best, your every move into the ground, Croc!"

Crocodile snarled and suddenly changed tactics himself, his hand changing into sand to dodge a punch only to reform immediately where it had been after Luffy pulled his punch back,

grabbing Luffy right behind where his Busoshoku ended along one arm before he could dodge. He took a blow to the side of the head from Luffy's other hand, but held on long enough to drain all of the water out of Luffy's arm, as well as a portion of his stomach and side.

The blow from Luffy still sent Crocodile reeling backwards, knocking out two of his teeth, which Crocodile idly noted he wouldn't be able to reform. For some reason if a Logia type lost a body part like that to a Busoshoku infused punch they couldn't later reform them. It was as if the Devil Fruit power had been knocked out of those bits of the body.

Even so, and despite the fact that his poison had failed, he had finally been able to nail Luffy with his draining technique and began to laugh. "Cut, beaten, poisoned. Now dried out, and...buried!" he shouted, slamming both of his hands down onto the desert floor. "Let us see you mouth off now, Mugiwara!"

Luffy gasped, rolling around on the ground as he stared at the desiccated arm that Crocodile had touched in horror. As Crocodile was sent reeling away, Luffy quickly began to focus his ki, pushing more of it into the arm in an attempt to somehow heal what Crocodile had done. While wishing to keep his ki abilities a secret even above everything else and only use them when he desperately needed to, this seemed necessary right now. He could feel a sense of being dehydrated filling him as he did so, but it worked, his hand slowly returning to normal under his panicked eyes.

But this kept him still long enough for Crocodile's next attack to take him, burying Luffy in the sand. It was all he could to raise one hand above the sand.

Crocodile stared at the quicksand where Luffy had disappeared save for one hand thrust out of the desert and allowed a wide, victorious smile to appear on his face. "Hah, ahahahah! That, that finally worked! You damn rookie, this, **this** is the true power of the Grand Line! Weep and despair for your crew, for your dreams, because they will all be joining you soon!"

Being buried in quicksand Luffy couldn't hear any of this of course. But the quicksand allowed for just enough movement for him to try and escape. *Ugh, can't believe I'm going to use a strategy from freaking Dragonball of all things! Still, any port in a storm, or whatever it is.* With that Luffy pointed one hand directly down and gathered his remaining ki, noting that healing himself from the draining technique had taken a lot out of him. The Moko Takabasha lashed out and down, the beam of ki acting like a force beam, pushing his body upward out of the sand.

To Crocodile it looked as if Luffy was on top of some kind of energy rocket which carried him up into the air. There he stood, gasping in air even as his blood crusted eyes latched onto Crocodile's. "You, you don't get it, do you, Croc! I told ya, I am the man who will be the Pirate King! I'll take on anything you can dish out and beat you down! This is the end for you and your ambitions!"

Even as he said that Luffy knew he was in trouble. His ki was fading fast by this point, the effort of overcoming the draining technique had in turn drained his ki reserves, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he would lose the ability to use Busoshoku.

"You foolish, foolish brat, you. How dare you say that to me?!" Do you have any idea who I am?! What I have done, sacrificed, and built to get this far?! This sea, this sea **eats** dreams like yours!" Crocodile roared angrily, charging forward.

Luffy met him, the jutte out and thrusting, while his other hand glowed. Even as Crocodile moved around the jab from the jutte his observation haki screamed at him, as Luffy launched several small balls of blue energy at Crocodile. Each one struck a different part of his body, and such was the surprise of them and dealing with the Jutte at the same time two got through, smashing with drop-hammer force into his side and thigh.

In reply however Luffy took several blows, one of which smashed into his hand hard enough to make him lose his grip on his jutte. Luckily none of the attacks Crocodile launched were of the draining variety, or else Luffy might well have lost the fight then and there. Instead they were the Sabres attacks, heavy blades of sand slashing at and into Luffy.

The attacks cut into Luffy here and there including his foot but more importantly Luffy took another gash along his face, nearly catching his eye. But he had dodged just enough to avoid that. Reeling from the impact, Luffy blinked as something about it caught his attention, it wasn't as even as it should have been. The attack, it dissipated when it hit my forehead, but why... no, it can't be that simple can it?

Having nothing to lose, Luffy decided to chance it. At this point it was either trying this or using the Loud Thief technique, his ki was draining too fast dealing with his wounds after that water absorption attack. So Luffy swiped the backs of his hands through the blood on his face, then concentrated his Busoshoku on defense, taking the next few attacks to launch his own. This and his rage seemed to have blinded Crocodile's ability to use Observation Haki, and the next few punches got through to impact Crocodile's body before he could dodge.

For a second Crocodile wondered why the hell Luffy's no-longer reinforced punches were hitting him, only to stare in shock. *His blood. He's using his blood from all his wounds! How did he?!*

"I don't care who the fuck you are!" Luffy shouted, slamming his badly bleeding foot up into Crocodile's chin, flinging him backwards. "I am the man who will surpass you!" The same foot came back and slammed into Crocodile's chest, while his hand smashing Crocodile's claw away so hard the metal shattered. "I will be the Pirate King!"

**"You fucking brat!"** Crocodile roared, trying to bring his power to bear again in the form of sand formed into scimitars to cut into Luffy. But Luffy smashed several of them with his still

blood covered hands, letting the others hit while using one of them to push himself into air. Leaping forward over several more, Luffy lashed out with another series of punches.

But this was in fact a feint, as at the last moment Luffy used Soru, which he hadn't used up to this point often, to zoom over to grab up the Jutte from the sand. Before the enraged Crocodile could realize what was happening the point of the Jutte found his throat, impacting with crushing force.

"Guhhh," Crocodile gasped, trying to raise his hands up to touch his throat, but with Luffy holding the jutte there, he couldn't dissipate it into sand, as blood began to flow down from his open, gasping mouth to coat both the end of the jutte and his throat. Luffy pulled the jutte back and Crocodile fell to his knees, scrabbling at his throat to clear the blood, and never even saw a Luffy's fist coming back, flickering black with the last of Luffy's Busoshoku, crushing Crocodile's skull.

With that, Luffy backed away staring at Crocodile's body for a moment before shaking his head and stumbling away, almost going to one knee, such was his exhaustion, the jutte falling out of his nerveless hands. This was how Robin found him, hands coming out of the desert around him to grasp Luffy and hold him upright as she ran towards him.

"That was impressive," she said lightly, her tone belying her appraising glance and the surprising amount of happiness in her body language. She put Luffy's arm around her shoulders, one of her own arms around his waist and began to drag him towards the town. "Come on, I think the Marines are getting reorganized. We need to get out of here."

"The, the evidence?" Luffy muttered, his free hand coming up to wipe blood away from his mouth. He was covered with tiny to large gashes here and there, at least one of his ribs was cracked, and he felt as if one of his knees was dislocated, with numerous tendons and muscle groups battered. "You'll need to end the conflict between the royals and rebels before Cobra will probably let you see the pony-thing."

"I already found some and removed it from Rain Dinners," Robin replied, smiling slightly at how much concern Luffy was showing her desire to see the Rio Poneglyph hidden somewhere in this country. She first explained how she and Sanji had nearly been caught, and Gasparde's past and his being present, before explaining how Sanji had saved her earlier.

"After that, I was able to investigate the rest of the casino without further interruptions. I dropped a few bags of Dance Powder off in front of a few marines, as well as took some for ourselves to use as evidence for the Rebel Army. I believe Nami was also going to find the local communication system and use that to get the word out even faster, the bit about Crocodile being the one to use Dance Powder, that is. As Vivi said, if anything will turn the people of this country against Crocodile, the ownership of Dance Powder will, along with his connection to Baroque Works."

"Of course, explaining Crocodile's connection to Baroque Works will take quite a bit longer than simply shouting out that he has Dance Powder, let alone that he has been using both sides against one another in this conflict." She was rambling, Robin knew. But the sight of Luffy so injured had worried her, for reasons that she did not wish to contemplate just yet.

She was surprised, however, when Luffy's arm tightened around her shoulders. "Wait," he said. "How are you for..., that is, can you still concentrate on your power with those wounds?"

"Easily, why?" Robin asked, looking at him quizzically from a few inches away. For some reason her heart began to thump quicker as she looked into Luffy's eyes.

Luffy winked at her, gesturing over his shoulder to Crocodile. "You know what happens when a Devil Fruit user dies?"

"I believe his Devil Fruit reforms almost immediately in the nearest fruit..." Robin paused, then smiled somewhat evilly at Luffy. "You truly are quite a bit more intelligent than most would give you credit for. Are you thinking of taking it for yourself?"

"Probably not, no," Luffy said with a chuckle. "It's not my kind of power. But maybe one of the others will want it. If not, then, well, we've called Vivi the desert princess a time or two."

"Ah a pun, or play on words," Robin groaned, before gently pushing Luffy away from her and crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes closing to better help her concentration. Rows of hands moved from where she was standing towards the town, halting there, to be replaced by eyes on random surfaces, causing a bit consternation among a few people who saw them.

Robin ignored that, searching out any fruit wherever it might be. When she found them she left the eyes looking at them in place as she allowed the others to dissipate swiftly, making the people who had spotted them wonder if they had been seeing things.

The only ones who saw the random eyeballs were a few of the Marines, who had no idea what they were. Moreover, Zoro and fighting the BW agents in the town had put at least two-thirds of the Marines present out of action for a time, even if Zoro had gone out of their way to not kill any of them.

A moment later Robin's scattered eyes found what she was looking for. A regular looking jujube fruit, one of many on a plate set on a kitchen table in a random house in town slowly started to change, growing quite a bit and changing from having green skin to something that looked almost sandy looking, with swirls of what looked like wind going over its surface. *That must be it, unless...*

"I found it, but could it not be Mr. 1's or Gasparde's if Sanji and Zoro have dealt with them as you did Crocodile?" she asked.

To that Luffy shrugged. "If Zoro killed that 1 guy, maybe. I don't know if he did or not, same thing for Gasparde. For now grab it and see if you can get it to the nearest crewman."

That turned out to be Nami, who was leaning against and being leaned on in turn by Sanji. Nami had recently found the local public Den-Den Mushi system and used it to blare out that Crocodile had been using Dance Powder and that he had been involved in starting the rebellion, before exiting the house via an upper story window as Marines raced in to look for her. She had found Sanji making his slow way out of the town, using a disguise once more, but his side was badly slowing him down.

Now a hand appeared on Nami's unoccupied shoulder, waving right in front of her face to get her attention. Nami's head reared back for a moment as she gawked at the limb, shaking her head. "W, what the!"

Then she watched as another hand took something another hand handed to it on top of one of the nearby rooftops before hurling it down towards her. Nami reflexively caught it, and then looked at the bizarre looking fruit. "What the heck...."

Robin's hand flashed a thumbs-up to her, and then dissipated into numerous flower petals, and Sanji shrugged. "I think she wants you to take it Nami-chan."

"That's fine I suppose," Nami said, putting the fruit into her a pouch hanging off her belt, finding that it barely fit. "Though I have to wonder what the heck it is. For now, though, let's get the hell out of here."

Still standing next to Luffy outside the town Robin frowned. "Should I direct Zoro to us or send him towards the others?"

"Which is closest and easiest?" Luffy said, allowing exhaustion to take him for a moment as he slumped down to sit next to Robin, actually leaning against her leg for a moment as he stared into the town with bleary, blood-crusted eyes. Robin felt that, and cracked one eye open, looking down at him before smiling slightly and answering his question. "Sanji and Nami, easily."

"Do it," he ordered, his voice still strong despite his wounds and his exhaustion. *Heck, even my ki-healing isn't healing me as fast as it should.* "And then we'll have to figure out a way to get out of here before the bloody Marines are able to reorganize. Unless I miss my guess, none of us are really up to another fight."

"I would be willing to do so, I suppose," Robin said amusingly. "Though I would not be able to do anything about Smoker, and since we have hidden my involvement with you it would be a bad idea to let it come out now."

"Definitely making Busoshoku a priority with you Robin," Luffy said with a faint chuckle.

Just then they were interrupted by a loud donkey noise, and Eyelashes trotted towards them around the outskirts of the town. It was leading several dozen ducks of some kind that reminded Luffy of Carue. "What the heck?"

"There's a message tied to that lead duck's saddle," Robin said clinically after opening her eyes and spotting that immediately. "I've directed Nami towards us, and Zoro towards Nami and Sanji. They just came within sight of one another."

By the time the three other Straw Hat members arrived, Robin had helped Luffy up into the saddle of the lead duck. He had slumped over, keeping his eyes open with difficulty. "What the hell took you so long?" he grunted.

Zoro shrugged. "These two kept on getting lost."

He flinched as Nami smacked him upside the head. "What the hell do you mean **we** kept on getting lost, you katana-baka!"

"Get it right, you national treasure!" Sanji shouted Zoro's other ear. "You kept on turning around whenever we looked away for a brief second! How the hell can you get lost six times in the space of three blocks!?"

"Doesn't matter," Luffy said, cutting in and interrupting the byplay while Robin chuckled, pulling herself into one of the other saddles. "Vivi sent these," she explained at Nami's quizzical look. "She thought we might need a ride to Alubarna, as well as away from any Marine presence we might run into. She says there is a Marine presence there too, so we'll have to be careful when we arrive."

"That's fine," Nami sighed, pulling herself up into a saddle and wincing. From there she urged her duck over toward Luffy, whereupon she smacked him upside the head as hard as she could.

"OW! What the hell Nami, I'm injured already! What was that for?" Luffy asked, touching the back of his head. *What is it with anger making women stronger anyway?*

"That was for forcing me to fight damn it! I ran into one hell of a strong enemy out there and I almost died a dozen times!" Nami growled.

Seeing Luffy's suddenly worried and crestfallen expression Nami sighed, calming down noticeably. "Nevermind, I'll tell you more as we go. Right now, I just want to get the hell away from these marines, get all of us some first aid, I think and then maybe hide out in the desert for a while as the heat dies down, resting all the while."

"That's not a bad idea, though I don't know if it will work very well," Robin said, shaking her head. "Now that they know for certain we're still here, the Marines will simply stop

searching for us in favor of creating a cordon around the island. With that done, they will simply wait for us to come to them."

"Cordons can be broken," Luffy said, smirking slightly even through his injuries and his exhaustion, though now that his adrenaline was gone he knew he had at least two broken bones in his side and a broken thigh bone too. "Smoker alone isn't much of a challenge. Taking both him and that other one, Hina? Taking them both on at the same time, that could be more fun."

Zoro nodded as did Sanji, while Nami shook her head. "Only you would say that that kind of challenge would be fun," she said as her duck took the lead, racing over the sand faster than even Eyelashes had been able to run from that one sandstorm.

"By the way?" Nami said, looking over at first Robin then Luffy. "What the heck is up with this weird fruit?"

"It's Crocodile's," Luffy said, not offering any further explanation.

Sanji and Nami both blinked, staring at Luffy, then down at Nami's waist and the pouch there. "You, you can't be serious?!"

"Serious as a heart attack," Luffy said wearily. "Now let me sleep, would you?"

Zoro snorted a laugh, shaking his head. "A month and a half on the Grand Line and already we've taken out a Shichibukai and his illegal criminal organization. What are you going to do for an encore, Captain?"

Luffy chuckled too, but didn't open his eye again as he smirked. "Call up the Yonkou Whitebeard for no other reason than shooting the breeze. Would that do you?"

In reply Zoro let out a guffaw, while the others all looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

OOOOOOO

Smoker stared down at the Shichibukai Crocodile's dead body, shaking his head slowly as if he wasn't quite certain he believed what he was seeing. *Luffy left him for the crows. He left me alive but killed a Shichibukai. And that woman's voice over the public announcement system... And then there's the body of that damn mutineer Gasparde, allied with Crocodile from what little we know. And that's the thing, isn't it? We don't know what the **fuck** has been going on here. We need answers, about the Straw Hats involvement, about the princess's place in it all, and most importantly, what Crocodile was really up to.* Without looking away from the body he asked, "Have we found more Dance Powder?"

"That and more," Tashigi replied wearily. "We've found evidence above and beyond the ownership of illegal substances: notes, books, and reams of paper. The men are still looking through it. But...that pirate girl seems to have told the truth. Crocodile was connected to Baroque Works, and, well, with his ownership of so much Dance Powder we can't say that they were lying about his being behind the entire revolution here. We have also captured Daz Bones, the famous assassin, his partner, and recovered what remains of the pirate Gasparde and his first mate."

"Call Hina. Ask her what's going on over in the capital and then order her to pull out her troops and meet us here. We'll take a full day to go over all the evidence here. I'll lead a crew out to take Gasparde's ship and its crew. When I return we'll call it in to HQ," Smoker ordered.

While normally Smoker would have guffawed at the very idea of his needing direction or advice from the higher-ups, some things were too big for him to handle. The death of a Shichibukai was one of them. Especially the death of a Devil Fruit user, whose fruit might well have been taken by the crew which had killed him.

*At least, I would assume so. That was that devil child Nico Robin's power just then, though how she became involved with a crew of rookies or why is beyond me. Regardless, the Suna-Suna fruit is a Logia type, and the WG hates Logia types out of its control. So while the Straw Hats might have done what we couldn't have and saved this country and taken out Crocodile, the targets on their backs just grew massively,* Smoker thought, anger and bitterness warring within him at the thought.

OOOOOOO

It took the ducks half a day to cover the distance between Rain Dinners and Alubarna, a speed that was frankly phenomenal, even if they were just running in neutral. Once there they ran into Pell surveying the area around the capital. The falcon type Zoan quickly landed with Chopper on his back.

The little reindeer nearly bawled at the sight of all of their wounds. "Ahh, you're all injured! Doctor, we need a doctor!"

"Ain't that you little guy?" Luffy asked quizzically.

"Ah. Yeah." Chopper stopped panicking and immediately pulled his doctor's bag off his back and raced over to Zoro. Of all of them, Zoro looked the worst for wear, with Luffy tied as a close second. Though upon examination Chopper would find that it was Sanji who had the single worst wound.

As Chopper went to work, Luffy cocked a still blood encrusted eyebrow at Pell. Some of his wounds had healed by this point thanks to his ki healing ability, others hadn't. "Vivi and Makino, are they okay?"

"They are fine," the falcon man said, grasping Luffy's forearm tightly. "If not for Chopper and Makino, however, things would've gone much differently here." From that Pell explained what had happened, both in Alubarna and with him and Vivi when they went to meet the Rebel Army. Beyond that, Chaka had eventually found King Cobra hidden in a secret cellar in the basement of an inn on the outskirts of the capital. Once within the building even the smells of a busy inn had been unable to fool the Jackal's senses.

"But there are still Marines in Alubarna moving around; they haven't been called off just yet," Pell cautioned. "Their captain says they will be leaving soon, however, so you're going to have to wait out here until late this evening. Don't worry though; we've already prepared rooms and are secretly preparing a massive feast for you all."

"That's fine," Luffy said, his eyes cutting over towards Robin. "But we also need to talk to the king."

"Of course," Pell said with a nod. "He wishes to talk to you all as well. Anything for the saviors of both his nation and his daughter."

**OOOOOOO**

It was a properly bandaged and cared for group of pirates that were slowly welcomed into the palace that evening. The Marines had left as Pell had said they would, though Luffy had seen a flash of pink hair among them which made him very thankful indeed that they had waited. Battered as he was right now, he had no wish to tangle with another Marine captain.

While the others were shown quickly into different rooms and given new clothing and robes to wear to the dinner that evening, Robin and Luffy were ushered into a private sitting room with the king and Vivi. Vivi threw herself out of her chair, hurtling towards Luffy and hugging him tightly. "You did it! You did it! I hoped you could, but you really did it!"

Luffy grunted a little as the younger girl slammed into him, putting his arms around her in a hug of his own. "Easy there, Vivi! I'm a wounded warrior, I am," he said somewhat teasingly. A lot of his wounds had already faded, but many of the worst ones were still there, his body not having enough energy to heal them just yet, and he knew he looked a fright.

To one side Robin chuckled, and Vivi looked at her, backing away after nodding at the other woman.

"My daughter speaks for us all," Cobra said softly, looking at the two of them, though his eyes lingered on Nico Robin. "...You keep strange company for the savior of my nation, but I am not one who will look a gift camel in the mouth. You helped my daughter, you helped my nation, and you staved off what would've been a bloodbath. For all of this you have my thanks. Any boon you ask for will be granted so long as it is within my power to grant."

"Where are the rebels?" Luffy asked quizzically.

"Many of them have returned home to their bases for now. They will disperse in time," Cobra replied. "Others have moved into the town here to meet with myself and the Marine representative that will be arriving within a few days. The Marines have called in special WG investigators to go over some of the evidence that you discovered in Rain Dinners. There is a great deal of consternation in the World Government and the Marines with the death of Crocodile."

The king sighed, shaking his head. "I would have liked to ask you to stay here for a few days, but if you do that more Marines will arrive. They will swiftly have enough troops to search my country from one side to the other for you and also to throw up a cordon around the island that you will never escape."

Luffy shrugged his shoulders even as Vivi flinched slightly. "We weren't planning to stay for more than just this one night anyway. A bath and a good night's sleep, some food and water for the road, and that will do us, Cobra."

Chaka scowled at the lack of formality, but Cobra smiled. "Hahaha, that we can do! But I understand from Pell that the two of you wanted to speak to me?"

Looking around at the servants in view and the two guardsmen Luffy shook his head. "This is probably something best spoken about with only you and Vivi here. At least I assume that's how you've tried to keep the secret."

Cobra frowned at that, but shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, if you think we must." He gestured and Chaka scowled again, but obeyed following Pell and the servants out of the room quickly.

The moment the door was closed, Robin crossed her arms, "With your permission?"

Luffy nodded before Cobra could, and Vivi and Cobra watched as Robin's powers slowly went to work around them, making sure there was no one listening in. She eventually nodded, then looked at the king. "Your Majesty. For my aid in this, for turning against Crocodile, Luffy promised to get me an audience with you. What I need is access to the Rio Poneglyph hidden somewhere on this island, presumably somewhere in Alubarna. I do not know exactly where it is. Crocodile had discovered that and kept that from me successfully. I **must** have access to it," she reiterated, her eyes nearly gleaming with obsessive furor.

The king blanched. "Even, even if it is for our saviors. I know...who you are, Nico Robin," Cobra muttered, staring between the two pirates. "I...that secret... I..."

Luffy tensed, his eyes narrowing. While he had no wish to hurt Cobra, he had made Robin a promise and if he had to kidnap the king and somehow force him to tell them what

they wanted to know, he would. He wouldn't torture the man, but there were other ways to get him to talk. *Holding him upside down from two miles in the air for one.*

Seeing this and correctly interpreting how far Luffy would go to keep his promise, Vivi cut in quickly. "Father, please. Robin helped us quite a bit. Moreover, she doesn't want to read the instructions for the weapon that Crocodile was after. She is after something else entirely. Robin?"

Robin nodded, speaking up for herself. "I have no interest in Crocodile's goal. I believe that the Poneglyph in question will contain something else entirely: the history of the Void Century."

"What!?" Cobra's eyes widened as he reared back in shock, his mouth gaping. "You, you mean the Void Century, the history from that time is, it is still written somewhere out there? Then, then... why..."

"Exactly!" Vivi replied, though she didn't quite understand why that concept shocked her father so much. Then again, she had had no knowledge of the Void Century at all before Robin had explained it as part of her discussion with Luffy and the crew. "And if it is simply history, what will it hurt for that to be known? And, on the other hand, if it is only this weapon that Crocodile is after, do we really need to keep it hidden here?"

Cobra looked at his daughter, then smiled faintly. "You show great wisdom, daughter. That is true." He looked back over at Robin. "...You will not find what you are seeking on that rock. Indeed, the very idea that you could is odd to me. But if you are not in fact after the design for Pluton, I will show it to you tonight. But I ask you to either erase it from the stone or otherwise get rid of it, please. My daughter is right, such weapons should never see the light of day **ever** again."

"Agreed!" Robin said instantly, making Luffy breathe a discrete sigh of relief as Vivi did the same visibly. "I have no interest in the weapon. Only knowledge of the past interests me."

"Then wait here for a moment. I will return, and I will show all three of you where it is right now." A few moments later Vivi and Cobra returned dressed to blend in. Now in disguise, they led the two pirates out of the palace by a side entrance, which allowed them get out into the town unhindered. The town was still mostly empty, the inhabitants of Alubarna not having been allowed back just yet. Robin occasionally used her powers to make certain they were not being observed or followed, and twice warned them of people in their way, but Cobra was easily able to navigate them around and into the Royal Cemetery which was set at one edge of the town plateau.

Once there he moved forward quickly, finding a single statue out of the multitude and touching it in such a way that he was able to push in the nose, revealing an entrance leading

downward. He held his hand there for a moment before nodding to the others following after him.

"Will this close behind us?" Luffy asked.

"Yes, once I remove my hand this will start closing. I will have to open it once more on our way out," Cobra said, and the other three passed him quickly.

Once inside Cobra touched a few more places on the wall, pressing different rocks here and there, which he said would deactivate a few traps along their way. From there he led them through a short corridor into an open area, dominated by a massive stone square built into one wall and two large statues set to either end the space. The stone was of a very different material than the rest of the rock around it, looking almost like iron or concrete mixed together somehow, with the sheen of iron, but the look of concrete otherwise. Whatever it was, it was probably some kind of super dense stone. And on its front were tiny intricate words covering it from one corner down to the other.

"Robin, it's your show now," Luffy said, holding out the torch to her. As he did, Cobra and Vivi followed, watching closely.

Robin nodded, slowly exhaling as she stepped forward, her eyes locked with feverish intensity on the rock even as she went around and lit up several ancient looking torches set into the walls all around the room. Once she was satisfied with the light, she eagerly moved back to the rock and began to read.

As Luffy watched, Robin's face went from eager and interested to disappointed within one line. She read through the entire thing, but by the end the life had gone out of Robin's eyes to a degree that alarmed Luffy. Her face had closed down to a disturbing level too, and she slumped where she stood.

*It's not here. Nothing is here but the plans for Pluton! Nothing, no hint on the Void Century, no knowledge of the past, even of the kings of this country, no hint where to go next, nothing! I, this was... What have I been... Is my life really cursed?* Robin thought, staring at the stone and feeling a small knife she always kept at the small of her back just in case and wondering if she should just slice her own throat. *No one would miss me after all, and I don't have anything to live for any longer. Perhaps the world would even be better off without me.*

Robin's spiral down into depression was interrupted by a hand grasping her wrist. It was gentle that grip, yet also inescapable, steel covered by skin. It was only at that gently unescapable touch that Robin realized she had actually pulled the knife out of its hidden sheath. "I take it that what you were looking for isn't there?" Luffy's voice asked, his voice calm yet oddly compassionate.

"Let me do it," Robin said, her voice desolate, so grief-stricken and beaten that Luffy couldn't hold back a wince. "Please, I have nothing left to live for! My ambition, my dream, has been my curse for so long. I've, I've done such horrible things in order to survive, in order to see it through, and now, it's all for nothing!"

"Now that's just stupid," Luffy said bluntly, causing Robin to finally turn at him, actually glaring at him now for seemingly making fun of her grief. But as he went on that look faded somewhat. "Yer one of my nakama, Robin official member of my crew or not. I'm not gonna let you make a mistake like that, not without trying to talk you out of it, anyway. If after we talk ya still want to kill yourself, well it ain't my place to stop you, though don't think for a second you wouldn't be missed, at least by me. And Makino too. Oh, and Sanji too, I suppose."

Robin chuckled wanly, shaking her head. "You, you don't understand. This, this was supposed to be the Rio Poneglyph. It should have contained the history of the Void Century I've been searching for, the goal I have sacrificed everything for, my happiness, my dignity, my morality, everything! And it isn't. Without that, with my dream dead right in front of me I, I don't want to live anymore. I am so tired of the whole world being against my dream."

Cocking his head thoughtfully, Luffy retained his grip on Robin's wrist as he stared into her eyes. Her hand tried to jerk out of his grip, but Luffy felt that that was an unconscious gesture on Robin's part. "Have you been everywhere in the world?"

"What?" Robin asked, blinking at the apparent non-sequitur.

"Have you been everywhere in the world? Cause I have ta tell you, if you have it's kind of mean of you not to mention that little fact to Nami, given her own dream," Luffy said, keeping his voice deliberately light as he spoke.

"No, but what..."

"Then, how do you know the Rio Poneglyph doesn't exist somewhere else?" Luffy asked, interrupting her. "Just because this didn't lead to it doesn't mean it isn't out there somewhere. Or else you would never have even heard of it in the first place."

"I..." Robin thought for a moment, and some of the flame came back into her eyes, though not a lot. "That, that might be true, but, but where do I begin to look for clues? Where do I go from here? I am so, so tired of it all. Of always running, of always being seen as a demon, of being hounded for merely living." *For living on when I, like the rest of Ohara, was supposed to die under the Buster Call.*

"Have I ever looked at you like that? Has my crew? As for where you go from here, there you're just like the rest of us. You put one foot forward and keep your eyes open for clues. We're already going to be traveling the entire world both to reach Raftel and to achieve Nami's

dream of making a map of the whole damn place anyway. Somewhere you'll find a clue," Luffy responded.

As Robin's eyes widened at the implication, Luffy went on, his eyes hardening. "And if anyone calls you a demon they'll have to answer to this one! Existing isn't a crime, no matter what anyone else says, no matter who the fuck they are!" This wasn't the first time Luffy had heard of a child being hounded for simply living, after all. The story Ace had told him and Sabo about his mother, Portgas D. Rouge, still horrified Luffy to this day.

"I, I cannot... That is..." Robin stuttered to a halt, all her arguments dying under the intensity and determination in Luffy's gaze, as well as the warmth there. Just like onboard the Resolve she felt a flicker of something, only this time it wasn't a flicker but a bright little flame, and she could identify it too. Hope, it was hope. Hope that she had possibly found a place to really belong, nakama like Saul had told her about.

*And honestly, Robin, the analytical side of her mind thought, it isn't as if having me on the crew will add any more to the target on their backs at this point. Luffy did kill a Shichibukai after all. That is not to mention Sanji's killing Gasparde. So honestly, what do I have to lose here? What do I have to lose by believing in this hope I feel? In the, the welcome I see in those eyes of his?*

Slowly, Robin let go of the knife in her hand, letting it fall to the floor. As Luffy let her wrist go, she grasped his hand in hers, their fingers twining around one another as she smiled at him. "Very well, Captain-san. I suppose you have yourself a crew member."

Luffy grinned so widely that it looked as if his face stretched to hold it. At the same time his hand, calloused and thin but muscled and powerful, gently squeezed hers, sending a shiver of an entirely different emotion through Robin's body. "Welcome aboard, Robin."

## End Chapter

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Burgess—the guy with the X on his face—and Gasparde are from the movie Dead End Adventure - number 4 I think. I wanted to give Sanji a real chance to shine, since I have used him as comedy relief several times before this. I did however switch his and Croc's bounties.

I know that not putting in Makino's fight in this chapter is a cop out, but I just utterly blanked every time I tried to write it. I wanted to write it occurring inside an actual room and then out into the hallway, but for some reason I just couldn't picture the setting or how it would impact the fight. It will appear in the next chapter as a flashback.

I also know that this leaves the aftermath of the action to go really, but I decided that it and the escape from Alabasta could serve as a decent wrap up of this serious stuff before i head into a two week training montage/character interaction time before they arrive at Jaya.

I hope you all enjoyed it and have a Merry Christmas.