

Oda is not my last name and my first ain't Rumiko.

A bit of a warning, this chapter deals with one of the filler arcs of the anime: the Ruluka Island arc. If you have only read the One Piece manga it will probably be unfamiliar. But as a few reviewers pointed out it represented a way to increase the combat/medical/tech base of the crew, and I decided I couldn't ignore it.

It has also not been betaed. I tried to to so myself, but if I was ever good at that I wouldn't need beta readers in the first place. LOL. I have however sent it to Michael, and he will hopefully get it back in a week or so.

Chapter 14: Training, Talks and Looting

The Shichibukai Dracule Mihawk stepped off his small personal ship onto an island in the New World. It was a relatively small island, but a somewhat decent one since it didn't see any of the truly insane weather patterns that were the norm in the New World. But despite that it was too small to retain any normal human settlement and yet ihawk's ship wasn't the first to drop anchor here. There was another far larger galleon already at anchor nearby though its owners were nowhere in sight.

Typical of the man, doesn't even leave someone behind on lookout. What is it with the Yonkou that makes them all become so arrogant? Mihawk of course knew what it was: that it wasn't arrogance considering that every Yonkou could back it up. He just like to poke fun at this one, even in his head.

As Mihawk strode through the forest, he was spotted by several lookouts on guard around a makeshift camp set a ways from the shoreline. "It's Mihawk! Hawk Eyes is here. Are you here to make trouble Hawk Eyes!?" shouted more than one voice as men moved out of his way rapidly.

"Out of my way fools," Mihawk replied, waving them aside as if they were of no consequence, which to him they were. "I have no business with you, I only wish to speak to your captain."

Eventually he was led into the presence of Ben Beckham. The other man nodded to Dracule then without a word led ushered him into his captain's presence, as was right and proper. Pirate captains didn't deal with subordinates when meeting with one another and despite having no crew Mihawk was considered a captain.

Red-haired Shanks looked up his eyes bloodshot, his hair unkempt, wincing as the sunlight hit him. "Yo Hawk Eyes, are you here to pick a fight? I have to tell you I'm not in the mood this morning. I had some bad rum last night."

"It looks as if you just drank too much," Mihawk said bluntly sitting across from the man at the burned out fire pit that Shanks had been sleeping next to. "Besides, I have no wish to start a fight with one who has given up the way of the sword in favor of the fist. Such would sully my name as a swordsman."

That caused some angry growls from the crew, but Shanks simply laughed then winced, holding his head in his hands. Nearby Ben smirked, leaning against a nearby tent pole as Lucky Roo and Yasopp moved through the camp towards them.

"So what are you..." Shanks stopped speaking as Mihawk through a sheaf of papers down in front of them.

"You mentioned once giving your hat to someone in East Blue, imagine my surprise when I ran into the fellow." Dracule drawled.

Shanks stared at the bounty poster, holding it up and laughing slightly then louder and louder. "So you arrived Luffy!"

"Look at the second page," Mihawk ordered. "That one was Straw Hat's old one, the one below is his new bounty."

Shanks lot and then gaped. "130,000,000 Beli!? What the hell what did Luffy do?!"

"Fought and killed Crocodile," Mihawk said bluntly. "No one knows the reasons for why he challenged my fellow Shichibukai, but I was informed of the outcome when the World Government requested my presence to discuss a possible replacement."

Shanks paused, setting down the two bounty posters and looking at Dracule thoughtfully. "Okay, so why are you so interested in them? It can't just be because I handed over my hat to Luffy."

"I am not interested in their captain it all, save perhaps as an observer," Dracule said bluntly. "It is his first mate that interests me, Roronoa Zoro." The normally inexpressive man allowed a thin smile to appear on his face. "It has been a very long time since I saw eyes like that, eyes which could challenge the world."

"So he's already gathered a crew!" Shanks said laughing. "We'd heard he get a bounty, but we haven't received any of the new posters recently. He Ben! Get us some sake! Sake for me and my friend here!"

"It looks as if you've already drank enough for both of us. For the next week at the very least," Mihawk said, demurring. He was also more of a wine drinker than sake or beer.

This didn't stop Shanks, who took a massive saucer of sake from Lucky Roo and began to chug it down. He stopped for a moment, grinning over the lip of the sake at Mihawk. "Besides this Zoro guy you're interested in, are there any others that look like they'll survive the Grand Line?"

Shanks wasn't being callous so much as realistic. The number of crews that could survive Paradise without losing members were very small. Shanks himself hadn't even managed that, though he had served on a crew which had in his younger years.

Mihawk frowned thoughtfully. "I only fought the two of them, so I do not now. Several others have found bounties on them so I suppose they are of some decent ability. Though it's strange, I would have thought the green haired woman with them would have gotten a bounty as well, she was certainly..."

At hearing about a green haired woman on Luffy's crew Shanks spit out his alcohol straight into Dracule's face, halting Dracule's speech. Gasping and pounding his chest Shanks let his saucer smash into the ground. "W, what?! What by the Seven Seas and Davy Jones Locker is Makino doing with them!? She's no pirate!"

Twisting around Shanks stared at Ben. "Ben have any of our spies or allied crews heard about this?! What the blistering **fuck** is Makino or all people doing on the Grand Line!?"

Instead of answering, Ben looked at the slowly standing Dracule Mihawk, and quickly stepped back a few paces. "Um, boss, I think you should get out your sword. Or run away, one of the two."

"What, why?" Then Shanks turned, and saw Dracule now on his feet, one hand reaching behind his shoulder for the Black Blade. Shanks blinked. "Why are you all wet Hawk-Eye?"

The other pirates scattered, as the black blade left its sheathe and Shanks suddenly had no time to worry about Makino or her reasons to have left home with Luffy. At least for a few hours anyway.

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"I see them!" Luffy shouted at the top of his lungs. At the moment, he was hopping in midair a few hundred feet above Bon's ship, staring around the ocean for the Resolve. The added height allowed him to find his ship despite it being nighttime and because the ladies on the Resolve had set up several lamps scattered around its deck.

With Luffy guiding them, the Okama pirate ship made its way toward the Resolve while Luffy went ahead of them, alighting on the deck. "Hey ladies, oh and you okama guys too. We're back."

"We're back' he says," Nami muttered, moving over and smacking Luffy upside the head.

"What was that for?" Luffy asked, frowning at the girl. He really didn't want Nami to get into the habit of smacking him for every little thing after all. *Akane was more than enough there thank you.*

"You can create a tornado," Nami drawled. "A **tornado**! How?! How the hell did you learn how to do that, I don't know if I should be angry at your casually breaking the laws of nature, or envious!"

Luffy shrugged. "It's not exactly weather science, and besides which, this is the Grand Line. Is there such a thing as the laws of nature here?"

"God dammit let me at least keep some of my delusions!" Nami bellowed into his face, before she suddenly laughed and pulled him into a hug. "Seriously though, that was really too close for comfort! When that Marine that you fought showed up along with Smoker I thought we were all going to get captured!"

"Bipolar much, girl?" Luffy replied, though he hugged Nami back despite that.

Robin nodded, turning aside from where she had just dropped the anchor to smile at the captain. "I too thought the battle was going to go against us there. Though how exactly did you create a tornado in the first place?"

"Hot and cold air," Luffy said simply, moving back from Nami to wink at both girls at once.

Before Nami could get angry, he held up a hand. "Fighters, even low level fighters like most pirate and marine grunts have a sort of battle aura. The angrier a person gets, the hotter their battle aura is. And when hot and cold meet, they create a change in air pressure, right?"

"That makes sense," Nami mused, scowling as she unclenched her fist from where she was about to hit Luffy again. "Hot and cold can react like that, so long as you create a spiral pattern in the first place... And keep your own what'd you call it, battle aura, if you can keep your own battle aura cold enough."

"Yep," Luffy said in reply. "And I am sort of an old hand at that."

"And how exactly did you discover this technique?" Robin asked her eyes narrowed. She wondered if Luffy would evade the question or decline to answer.

Luffy simply smiled, holding up a finger to his lips. "Now, that is a secret..."

Shaking her head Robin chuckled, but made a note that her captain had added yet another strange ability to his bag of tricks. Nami simply growled, taking his non-answer much more seriously than Robin did since the older woman had expected it. But even Nami shook it off speaking her thoughts aloud for a moment in a dreamy sort of tone. "If only we had some way of creating an effect like that manually, like through some kind of weapon."

"That's kind of fanciful isn't it?" Luffy asked skeptically.

"So is creating a tornado in the first place, or I don't know, changing genders when splashed with water," Nami said deadpan then shook it off. "Where away is Bon's ship?"

Under Nami's directions and now within range of their Den-Den Mushis the two ships met up quickly after that. Nami and Robin made a point of looking with disfavor on Sanji, having seen him interrupt Zoro's battle with Hina. The Chef didn't seem to notice, whirling towards them and bowing grandly. "Ladies, please rejoice, your knight has returned!"

The two of them exchanged a glance but before they could say anything Luffy whispered, "We'll deal with Sanji's punishment after we split off, don't worry about it for now." Out loud he shouted, "Sanji! I think our breakout calls for a small celebration. Whip us up some food!"

Sanji smiled, saluting mockingly. "Yes captain, I'll get right on that. Ladies, do you have any requests?"

Bon slapped his face, suddenly changing into Nami for a moment and twirling. "I would like some crêpe Suzette please, and shrimp, I demand shrimp!"

This caused Sanji to twitch and he looked over at Nami pleadingly, but she laughed waving him off. "You heard the... momentary... lady."

Luffy shivered, but said nothing. In his mind Bon had proven himself it in the battle. The aquatranssexual still found Bon weird, somewhat disturbed by the idea of anyone **choosing** to change genders rather than have it forced upon them. But the man was a decent fighter and damn smart, which had served both of their crews well against the marines.

With Chopper moving around the two crews seeing to injuries and Makino and a few of Bon's crew throwing in with Sanji in the kitchen the party got underway quickly, with Luffy filling everyone in on the marine he had fought.

Robin alone among them understood the significance of taking on a Vice-Admiral and winning in particular in the manner that Luffy had done so and who this particular vice Admiral was. More importantly, Robin knew who his patron was. She shook her head however, vowing to speak to Luffy about that after the party. Right now, they had a reason to celebrate.

The party quickly got underway after that, starting with a few of the Okama pirates beginning to play some music on a few violins of all things. Luffy let out a laugh, then hopped up and began to dance in place with Chopper, whirling and twirling around one another. Bon took it upon himself to entertain the two crews, first dancing with Luffy and Chopper, then changing his face to match people he had whose form he had taken in the past, including Cobra and performing impressions, both of them being in character and then acting wildly out of character.

With that Going on Luffy stopped dancing. Instead he moved around, talking laughing before settling down into a arm wrestling contest with Sanji and Zoro, drinking and eating all the while to regain his reserves. He then engaged Robin in a discussion about books which drew Chopper from the dance floor as well as Nami and Makino for a time, before the three girls shifted the topic to other things. Luffy and Chopper swiftly moved over to join a group of the crew around Sanji, who was demonstrating a method of barbecuing.

The party lasted throughout the night but ended as the sun came up. Both crews knew they needed to get a move on, they couldn't remain anchored here for very much longer despite take having taking two days to put some distance between themselves and Alabasta lest the marines find them again. Though their rigging and masts were undamaged the two ships had taken a bit of a pounding and were not up for another fight.

While his crew was preparing to leave Bon held up a small jug of alcohol and sat down cross-legged by the mast of the Resolve. "As captain of the Okama Pirates, I offer my pledge of friendship and alliance to the Straw Hat Pirate Crew!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, causing both his own crew and the Straw Hats to turn to him.

Luffy had heard of this before from Shanks, though he had never thought to be a part of this ceremony so quickly without Ace on the other side of things. Sitting across from Bon equally cross-legged, Luffy picked up the saucer set there, holding it out to the other pirate captain. "As captain of the Straw Hat pirate crew, I accept this offer of alliance. If you call, we will answer."

"If you call, we will answer!" Bon repeated, pouring sake into both of their saucers.

"With this we are brother crews!" Luffy declared, once more with Bon echoing his words. An instant later the two captains smashed the saucers down onto the deck shattering them into hundreds of pieces. They then stood up, grabbing each other's forearms and pumping once.

"Farewell until next time my friends," Bon said, dancing away from Luffy over towards the balustrade, then leaping like a swan into the air in a perfect gran-jette onto his own ship. Without further ado the two ships pushed away from one another, both crews waving farewell until the wind caught the Okama ship and started to pull it away.

"Bon's a weird guy but one of the better ones I think," Luffy said, standing next to Nami on one side and Zoro on the other, Chopper on his head, his hat on Choppers head in turn.

"I liked him. He was weird, but funny," Chopper said. "I wonder if I'll ever be able to dance like that."

"Maybe someday if you keep practicing," Luffy said with a laugh. "Just don't dress up like him that's all I ask."

"That is a horrible, horrible thought and I curse you for putting it in my mind," Zoro said dryly.

Behind the swordsman Sanji began to gag and blush at the same time. The cook had just imagined Luffy in both his forms in the tutu that Bon wore for everyday garb. "OOghghh, Heaven and hell," he moaned, rolling on the deck.

Luffy looked back at him and his eyes narrowed seriously. "Nami, is there any weather issues coming our way for a while?"

"Nope," Nami said after looking up into the air for a moment. "We can get on our own way quickly."

"Let's go. Set the course navigator-chan, Sanji I will be on the sails. After we have them set up though I'm calling a crew meeting by the wheel."

That took them about twenty minutes until they were course was set and the sails to match well enough for Nami's exacting standards and even as the others gathered around the wheel, she kept an eye on both course and weather. Here on the Grand Line the direction and the weather could change in an instant, and with the marines still out there somewhere no one wanted to lose their course.

Once everyone was gathered, Luffy looked at Nami and Robin, who had remained behind on the Resolve throughout the battle, unlike Sanji who had to move between ships. "How's the ship?"

"We're ship-shape," Nami said looking over at Robin. "Chopper and you three did a great job keeping those spear things that they were chucking at us away, though we still took a few hits from the normal cannons. None were below the waterline and the two of us were able to patch them over the past few days."

Lifting the spots bestowed a proud smile on all three of them then looked at Robin. "What can you tell us about the next islands we might see?"

"There are several small islands I know of around Alabasta. Several of them do not appear on either of the actual paths through the Grand Line that passed through Alabasta, they are dead ends. I can't say I know much about the two that are on those routes however. I sort of came across the Grand Line several times during my travels. I never followed a route from the very beginning. I can tell you however there is a pirate-only island called Jaya about three weeks travel from Alabasta. I was there briefly. The town is run like a sort of resort ostensibly open to everyone, but the town that has sprung up there panders to pirates most of all. You can resupply and refit there at an exorbitant cost yet it is a rather lawless town."

"That sounds horrible," Nami said bluntly. "I hope we don't have to go there."

"I don't know it sounded like fun to me," Luffy said with a laugh. Zoro and Sanji agreed while the girls all shook their heads and Chopper looked rather skeptical. "But you can't tell us anything about the next specific island?"

Robin shook her head. "I am afraid not." She waved her hands and dozens of eyeballs appeared all around them on the deck, the masts and even the rigging. "Simply get me to an island and I'll know quite a bit about it quickly. But I'm sorry my travels around the Grand Line were not organized enough for me to tell you anything specifically about our route at present. If I ever recognize an island I will be quick to tell you."

Luffy nodded then turned to the elephant in the room. "All right, that's enough of that for now, instead we have to deal with a... disciplinary issue. Sanji, do you have anything you want to say to the crew?"

Sanji hopped to his feet, looking around at the crew before bowing slowly. "I'm sorry I nearly got Marimo killed, but my chivalrous nature would not allow me to stand aside and watch him fight such a gorgeous~ lady even if she was a Marine!"

Whatever Luffy or the injured party had to say about that was left unsaid as the womenfolk beat them to it. Makino marched up to Sanji, stared him straight in the face then slapped him upside the head. "That's not chivalry Sanji," she said coldly, "that's stupidity."

"It's stabbing your crewmates in the back," Nami said moving over to slap him upside the head to. Robin did not join in, simply shaking her head slowly and sadly, as if she was very disappointed in a little child.

Watching Sanji's face fall, Luffy decided not to add any of his own words into that harsh assessment. After all what Nami said was true: if Luffy had not been able to finish his fight as he had and if Bon hadn't figured out a plan Zoro might well have been captured.

"Okay Sanji, this has been a sort of wake-up call. I realize we're not likely to run into a lot of enemies of the fairer sex, but I think we need to solve this problem." Luffy said, his voice actually rather kind. Sanji was a damn good crew-mate, and more than that he was a friend. For

that Luffy could look beyond his foibles, so long as they didn't put the crew in danger, which was the point.

"I can't help it!" Sanji exclaimed. "I simply love the ladies that's all. I'll try not to interfere in future fights against ladies, but I can't promise that I won't."

"Your punishment will be training to get you out of that habit. I'll come up with a training regimen to make certain that you understand that women can be your enemies too," Luffy replied ignoring Sanji's words and smirking evilly, a sight that sent Sanji backpedaling quickly while Zoro laughed. "As for your actual punishment..." Luffy looked around at the rest of the crew. "Any ideas?"

Makino held up a hand quickly. "No flirting for a week?"

"How would we reinforce that?" Luffy asked skeptically. "Besides, I don't know if you could stop him flirting, it seems to be a sort of integral part of his personality." Sanji nodded rapidly at that, before Luffy went on, causing the entire crew to break out into laughter. "And I for one am not willing to go without the treats he makes for the girls." This obviously included Luffy's own female body hence the laughter.

But Nami had a solution. She held up a hand, drawing all attention to her before giving the most vicious smile she could possibly give as she looked at Sanji. "I vote every time he flirts during that week we ladies have to kick him in the fork."

Luffy flinched as Chopper and Zoro did the same. Even the swordsman thought that was too far, while Sanji simply froze like a statue, tears falling from his eyes as if his entire life had just been proven a lie. "You inhuman monster!" Luffy and Zoro bellowed as one.

"I am not!" Nami shouted back, her teeth forming into fangs for a moment as she did before calming down. "It's just the first thing that came to mind. If we're going to treat this like some kind of training then we need to connect flirting with pain."

"That's a little too far," Luffy decided quickly shaking his head, and thanking every god in existence that Akane or one of the others had never gone that far in trying to correct Ranma's own actions. "The punishment training will do for that anyway. I've already got some ideas along that line. But since we're talking about things that we need to correct," Luffy went on looking over at Zoro. "your sense of direction is going to be the one of them too."

Zoro blinked once before roaring angrily, his teeth doing the same odd shark impression Nami had made a moment earlier. "I don't have a problem with my sense of direction! Everyone else does!"

"Yes you do!" everyone else shouted back, with various degrees of exasperation.

"If I'm going to get on Sanji for his flirting getting us in trouble, which has already been proven, I need to be just as serious about trying to cure you of your sense of direction." Luffy went on, waving his hands to the others. "So every night for the next few weeks, Nami here is going to teach you the rudiments of navigating along with signs in nature that can tell you what direction you're going."

Nami balked at that. "Why me?" she asked plaintively. *That'll be like trying to get water out of a rock!* Since Zoro had gotten lost both in Rain Diners and Vivi's palace she felt that opinion was justified.

"Because you're my navigator," Luffy said as if it was the most obvious thing in the universe.

Which come to think of it Nami thought *it kind of is, damn it.* She was also trying desperately to keep a happy flush off her features at the way Luffy had sad 'my' there. "What about you?" she shot back. "You're not exactly perfect either, heck none of us are."

"I know. I need to think of some way of making sure that I remember to act like a captain such as organizing us better in the future even if we're separated, long term supplies, that kind of thing. I also know I have a penchant to punch first and look for other solutions never, but that's why I've got you lot," Luffy said smiling winningly at Nami and the others.

Nami's blush escaped her control at that point while the rest of the crew rolled their eyes, but then Luffy yawned. "Well, I don't know about you but I didn't get much sleep last night or the two days previous. I'm going to conk out. I want two people on watch, one at the tiller and one up in the crow's nest. Other than that, this meeting is adjourned."

Because he slept throughout the day, Luffy took first watch that night staying at the wheel with a book in one hand. The title was *Blades of the Desert* and Vivi had recommended it to him well before they actually got to Alabasta because it depicted a martial arts style that was based upon something that Luffy, with his memory of being Ranma would call a variant of Pencak Silat: a style that could fight on any surface, even walls or shifting sand without any loss of its ability. The titular blades were a kind of weird katar/rapier hybrid and weren't really interesting to him. *Though I might share it with Zoro, see what he thinks. Then again, I'm only a chapter in, so we'll...*

A voice interrupted Luffy's thoughts then. "Having regrets?"

At the voice Luffy turned slightly, looking toward the stairs leading up from the main deck to the after-castle. Robin stood there having somehow come out on deck and walked up those steps without him hearing her. *Was I that into the book?* Quickly Luffy looked down at the Log Pose and began to work the wheel, getting them back on track.

With that done, he looked back up at Robin and quirked an eyebrow, tone somewhat sarcastic. "Everyone has regrets, you're going to have to be more specific than that."

"Very well," Robin said, a small smile flickering around her face, visible in the starlight. "Do you have a specific regret then about leaving Vivi behind and on top of that not taking the princess up on her offer."

Luffy's eyes narrowed. "Vive made the decision of staying behind, I'm not about to regret **Vivi's** decision though it does make me sad to leave a friend. And how the hell do you know about what she, she 'offered' me?"

"I have long been in the habit of seeding rooms around wherever I am sleeping with eye and ears. That is a habit that has saved my life several times. I didn't mean to watch you, but I did hear your little meeting with the Princess." Robin said somewhat apologetically.

Luffy sighed at that but slowly nodded. "I can understand that at least, though it was a private moment. The moment you realized that you should have canceled your DF power."

"I do tend not to try to budge into those, but the phrase curiosity killed the cat could just as easily be read as curiosity killed the woman," Robin replied ruefully. She then fell silent, looking at Luffy.

Even in the light of the stars and his one smell thieves' lantern Luffy could see the question on her face and he sighed. "I'm not my Oyaji," he said, repeating the words he had told Vivi that night. "My Oyaji used to be a every girl in a poor kind of guy, loving an' leaving them. That's not my scene."

Actually, that was only halfway true. According to Garp that was indeed the case, though Dragon had apparently settled down when he began his revolution. Luffy still had no idea who his mother had been, a revolutionary officer who had died in childbirth was his best guess, but that was all. On top of that was Shanks and what he had done with Makino which never ceased to anger Luffy, though not as much as the woman in question.

Robin nodded her head, taking Luffy's words at face value. "You handled Vivi's offer and confession about as well as could be expected." Looking down at the book in his hand, the title visible in the light of his lamp she smirked slightly. "That's an interesting choice of nighttime reading..."

"Vivi recommend it to me. She thought the martial arts would be interesting to me and I gotta say the first fight scene was pretty decent," Luffy replied, with all the airs of a connoisseur of such things.

"Ah, I see," I Robin said, hiding her mouth behind her hand as she chuckled. "Yes I suppose that could be one draw of it. The other is that it is rather... salacious in parts. It isn't quite a full book blown erotic novel, but it is close."

Luffy looks down at the book in his hand, then up at Robin. "...And how exactly do you know that?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Robin replied, winking at him before quickly changing the subject.

Blushing slightly both of them looked away, then Luffy looked back down at the book. "Though I do wonder if Vivi knew about that aspect. Maybe she read a watered down version."

"Probably," Robin said with a smile. "Her crush on you was developed several weeks before we arrived in Alabasta where you did battle with the monster threatening her people for nothing more than friendship's sake. You have to admit, that makes you out more like a fairytale hero than a pirate."

Luffy shrugged his shoulders, not rising to the bait.

Chuckling, Robin moved to sit beside him on the small sofa that Luffy had installed near the wheel for long nights like this. When she spoke next Robin's voice was more seriously "Your defeat of Doberman will have painted an even larger target on our back you know."

"I don't remember saying his name. In fact, I don't think I even heard it unless one Marine said it, though I can't disagree with your point of course." Luffy replied, cocking his head at her, moving so that they could look at one another with the lamp shining its narrow light onto the wheel to one side. "Though you make it sound as if the fact it was Doberman is half the trouble."

"I know that one by his looks alone," Robin said with a shudder. "Doberman once hunted me on an island called Deep Valley. I was only saved because I destroyed his vessel and at the time his Geppo was not up to chasing after the merchantmen I hid away on. Worse however is the fact I know his patron."

Luffy leaned back further, looking at her noticing the serious, almost fearful cast of her face in the lamplight. "Tell me," he said simply.

"His name is Akainu, and he is a Logia: type magma user," Robin replied equally simply. "And he will not take it well that his protege was defeated by a rookie in a one-on-one battle, even a rookie like you who had previously defeated a Shichibukai. I do not believe he will get permission to come after us himself, but what he can put in our way he will. And that will mean a lot of trouble down the line."

Luffy's face blanked as he thought about what he knew about the three logia type admirals. The only one that Luffy thought he could fight as he was at the moment was Aokiji given his near immunity to cold weather thanks to his Soul of Ice, and his use of Haki. But even Haki could be overcome by a logia type eventually, and in a duel of Haki, the will of one fighter could break the other. *I'm going to need to up my training then.*

"And the rest of us?" Robin asked, making Luffy realize he had spoken those thoughts aloud.

"Training for the crew of course, Busoshoku for you for certain. If you can start using that with your hands you can be utterly deadly against Devil Fruit users. But I also want everyone to be able to use Geppo if they have to. Some endurance and movement training for you, Makino and Nami on top of leg exercises. Makino hates heights, so it'll be tough but Makino's endurance means she can't use Haki very long. if anyone needs to run, I mean to make certain they have the best tools to do it."

"Dodging training for Makino, Nami and Chopper, matching the training I've given Sanji. I'll have to do something about Nami's overall abilities too. I want her to be able to run away from anyone and everyone if that's what she wants to do. I made the mistake once of trying to make Nami a front-line fighter once, I'm not going to do it again."

With a shake of his head, Luffy threw off those serious thoughts, reaching out with the book to poke Robin in stomach. "Enough serious shit for the night, I'll think more about that tomorrow. You're the most well traveled of us all and I've been wondering a few things for a while. First, is it true that North Blue is the most advanced ocean?"

The conversation shifted from there, and neither of them noticed when the sky began to lighten the distance.

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Vivi sneezed and then blushed though for the life of her she couldn't figure out why.

"Someone is talking about you my dear," Cobra said with a chuckle. "At least that is what the sneeze might mean. The blush I have no idea. Is there something you want to tell your dear father?"

"Many things, but nothing that could explain my sneeze or my blush," Vivi said tartly and her father laughed.

But after a moment's levity they sobered turning back to getting their stories straight. There would need to be two layers of the story they had to share with the World Government inspectors and the Marine Admiral coming here. One was the public image, the one the WG would run with for public consumption.

The other the WG would 'discover' as they dug into things, and found out about Vivi's connection to the straw hats. It would look to the WG like a monetary arrangement, something no one would fault the kingdom or Vivi for given Crocodile's status as a Shichibukai and the scant real evidence she had before the discovery of Crocodile's Dance Powder.

On top of that would be a third story to be discovered just in case: that the Straw Hats turned on Vivi and Cobra after the deal was concluded, ransacking the library and treasury. Said treasury was of course practically empty at this point given how much monies Cobra had used during the civil war to repair the damages of the fighting, but since he had done that through subsidiaries, only Cobra, Vivi and Chaka, who had handled that job, knew about it. Well, them and Kohza now.

With those three stories in place, the WG would be satisfied with their findings. It was hoped they would not punish Alabasta or its royal family after that, but Cobra didn't know the admiral being sent to oversee things, so he didn't really know just yet. They could only make certain that their stories were prepared and everyone knew their roles in it by heart.

OOOOOOO

Nami woke up the next morning stretching her arms up above her head luxuriantly. The so-called beds they were using on the Resolve weren't exactly high-end, but with the number of mattresses all piled up they were comfortable things. They had been tossed around during the battle, but that had been easy to fix.

Having finished stretching Nami looked over to the other beds in the woman's quarters, her mouth opening to say hello to her roommates before she paused. Staring at the bed next to hers, Nami's hand clenched into a fist, punching the mattress. *Dammit I miss Vivi!*

She frowned then, staring unseeing at Vivi's bed as she thought about what she had seen that last night in Alubarna's palace. *It shouldn't bother me. After all, Luffy and I aren't an item, and I've never had the desire to be anyone's girlfriend. Being tied down like that is just not my scene. I should also be happy Luffy turned her down like that, but for some reason I'm just not able to be happy about that aspect when I consider the whole thing.*

Whenever Nami remembered that moment when she saw Vivi kissing Luffy it made her insides boil and shrivel at the same time. It was if she was about to scream in rage and be sick at the same time. It was not a feeling she had ever felt before. There was some jealousy in there too, that at least she recognized but the rest was... different. And Nami didn't like it.

Shaking her head to free it of such thoughts, Nami hopped out of bed moving toward her wardrobe. Knowing it would be a relatively hot day today and very sunny to boot she pulled on a swimsuit top and tight barely there shorts before walking out of the room and up to the dining room.

She frowned then, seeing that the only one awake was Sanji who didn't even hear her enter, busy cooking breakfast. Makino was still asleep in the women's quarters, so her absence was no surprise but Nami had expected to see Robin and Chopper there, nursing coffee and a drink respectively as they read their books. That was the normal way they started their days, while Zoro and Luffy would have a few hours before breakfast where they would spar out on the deck.

Moving out onto the deck she found the missing Robin along Luffy sitting on the bench around the main mast, talking about something. Luffy was using his hands to describe something it looked like, though he stopped when he caught sight of Nami over Robin's shoulder.

"There you are," he said, cheerfully greeting the crew's navigator. He had gotten a few hours' sleep last night with Robin spotting him at the wheel. Chopper was up there now, watching the wheel. Zoro and Makino were the only two still asleep though in Zoro's case that wasn't exactly a surprise, given the fact Luffy hadn't roused him for training as he normally did.

"Here, catch!" Luffy said, tossing over what looked like a switch of some kind. It was too short and too thin to be a real staff.

"And what is this for?" Nami asked, somewhat nonplussed and also not happy to see the two of them sitting so closely for some reason. It felt like jealousy again, but that just couldn't be right, could it?

"An anti-stupid stick," Luffy said grinning gesturing with his head over Nami's shoulder to the galley. "It was your idea remember? For the next two days every time Sanji flirts, you get to hit him. Just nothing below the belt."

Nami looked down at the stick and over to Sanji as he came out of the door with several trays of food. As he set them down she rolled her eyes. "You didn't really think I was going to go through with that did you?"

She waited as Sanji turned, flashing heart image in his hands and vowing eternal devotion to her before going on. "I'd just get Zoro to do it for me."

Sanji immediately turned into a statue before collapsing to his knees, the hearts his eyes had become shattering.

"That was very cruel," Luffy said then raised a thumbs up. "I approve. However about ya go use that stick on Zoro right now?"

"Not that I'm complaining but why?" Nami asked, a grin on her face as she contemplated that she had just gotten permission to hit the swordsman, whose lazy manner

outside of combat irritated her. the fact Luffy had asked her to beat some navigation ability into Zoro was also bothering Nami. *Best to start getting my licks in now.*

"I want the entire crew together for this," Luffy said with a laugh. "I want to call Whitebeard this morning."

Nami's face paled, and Sanji changed back to normal his jaw dropping at how calmly Luffy said that. That worthy however simply clapped his hands and looked at Nami "Go on, go get Zoro."

With the crew gathered on deck around the mainmast and Nami sitting by the wheel Luffy explained what he was going to do. The reactions were mixed. Makino looked concerned, Zoro excited. Chopper afraid, Sanji awestruck and attentive. Nami was afraid while Robin was intrigued.

"This should be interesting," Zoro said, giving voice to a lot of their thoughts.

Luffy laughed in reply and then dialed in the number on the international Den-Den Mushi that they had taken from Alabasta. Unlike their paired set, this one could reach out to any other Den-Den Mushi in the world, though of course the signal quality varied.

The Mushi on the other end rang a few times before it was picked up. "Yo this is the Moby Dick, who's calling?"

"Hey, is this Whitebeard?" Luffy asked.

The owner of the voice on the other end seemed to pause, obviously taking in the fact it didn't know Luffy's voice before replying in a more serious tone. "This is Marco. Why do you want to talk to Oyaji?"

"This is Straw Hat Luffy, Ace's little brother. I want to talk to his Captain."

The voice on the other hand fell silent then came back, a smirk visible on the Den-Den Mushi. "Wait a minute I'll get Oyaji."

Seconds later a new voice was on the line. It was deep, almost subterranean, so deep and powerful it sounded as if it couldn't come from a normal human's throat. "This is Whitebeard. What do you want, gaki?"

Luffy grinned. "Yo, Ossan. I've always wanted to talk to the guy who's known as the strongest man in the world. Even if you are older than dirt."

Everyone around Luffy gasped, as did a few people on the other end, but Whitebeard simply laughed loudly. "Gurarara! Cheeky brat!" Then he sobered. "But if that's all you wanted

to tell me I'd prefer to be insulted to my face if at all. That way I can smack youngsters like you down personally. AND if you can survive long enough you prove you're worth the second it'll take me to do it."

"Heh, well, I also wanted to thank you." Luffy said, somewhat more seriously.

"Thank me? Why?" Whitebeard asked quizzically. Then he seemed to nod, the motion carried over by the Den-Den Mushi, which had quickly morphed to look somewhat like Whitebeard complete with long white mustache. "You mean taking in Ace?"

"That and something else but yeah that off the bat. You gave Ace a home, you helped expunge the anger and hate in him that even me, Sabo and Makino couldn't. For that I'd thank you. But that's not all. One Piece." Luffy said, his voice turning from happy to serious on those last few words.

The Den-Den Mushi's eyes narrowed, but Luffy went on unhurriedly. "You could've declared yourself Pirate King after Gold Roger died. You could have simply said you had found One Piece. Who would've been able to say you were lying? But you didn't, you let the dream survive. For that my generation of Pirates wherever we are, we have to thank you."

Whitebeard snorted. "As if I would ever want to be Pirate King. That was never my dream boy."

"No I didn't think so, though Ace seems to think ya want to be," Luffy said with a grin.

"Brats always think like that, big dreams and not seeing what they already have. What about you," Whitebeard asked, changing the subject abruptly. "Do you and your crew want to become some of my sons?"

Everyone around Luffy gasped. After all, it wasn't every day that a rookie crew was invited to join a Yonkou's fleet. And despite the fact that they had beaten a Shichibukai they all knew they were rookies still. Ace had told them they would remain rookies until they reached the New World whatever they accomplished before that.

"I love the sentiment of nakama as family, but considering I've already killed a Shichibukai and also crippled a vice-admiral for life a few days ago..." Luffy trailed off, smirking slightly and winking at Zoro and Sanji, who looked at one another in confusion..

"Bah, you think that being my son would add more heat to that rather than take it away?" Whitebeard asked. "If you've really crippled one of those pricks it won't bring as much heat as you think in comparison to what you'll already be facing."

"Nah!" Luffy said with a laugh. "I figure though with that kind of bonafides I'd have to demand to join your crew as your First Division commander. That mean I'd have to fight that Marco guy and he seems decent enough from what Ace said so I'd hate to have to kick his ass."

Laughter abruptly roared out from Zoro Sanji and others in the background on Whitebeard's side of the line. Marco's voice could also be heard, shouting about how he'd routinely kicked Ace's ass and he would do the same to Luffy.

But they were all drowned out by the loud booming laughter of Whitebeard. "GARARARARA! Cheeky damn brat," he bellowed between guffaws. "You really are one-of-a-kind aren't you gaki! No wonder that red-haired boy gave you his hat."

"It's the sign of a promise," Luffy said, glancing over to Makino who smiled faintly remembering that incident. "A promise I mean to keep. I'm going to find One Piece and I am going to be the Pirate King Whitebeard. No matter who gets in my way."

The other line fell silent, and then the famous Yonkou laughed again. "GURARARA, I like those words! I like those words, but that's all they are for now, just words on the lips of our rookie. You come to the New World, you stand on the deck of the Moby Dick, and then we'll see if you can declare yourself so proudly."

"I'm lookin' forward to it!" Luffy said with a laugh. Then he sobered. "Ace also told me why he was in Paradise, hunting this Blackbeard character. What should I do if I run into him?"

Whitebeard fell silent, and when he spoke his voice was stern, rumbling with power that somehow communicated over the Den-Den Mushi making more than one of the Straw Hat crew tremble slightly from the force of it. "He committed the worst crime the pirate could, killing another of my sons. There is no hell deep enough for scum like that! But we will handle it in-crew Straw Hat. Don't get involved."

Luffy was unmoved by this show of force, and simply nodded. "Understood. But what if Blackbeard starts something?"

"There it'll be your choice brat. But I'll warn you not to underestimate Blackbeard. He's a cagey one, always looking for angles." Whitebeard warned.

Luffy nodded once more at that thinking it was sound advice. "Right. And which of your islands will we see first?"

"My flag flies over Mermaid Island brat, it's the only one of my holdings in Paradise. But if you cause trouble there or any of my islands your connection to my son Ace won't matter. You'll face me!"

"Well damn you didn't have to make it sound so tempting!" Luffy said with a grin.

That won Luffy a booming laugh from the other end of the Den-Den Mushi, and more than one shouts of "Oh, my God is he crazy!?" in the background and more hooting and hollering and shouts of "the Rockies got a mouth on him at least!"

"GURARARA, I look forward to meeting you in person brat," Whitebeard said before he ended the connection. The Den-Den Mushi slumped forward, slowly reverting to its base type.

Luffy looked up at Zoro, and then Sanji, holding out his fist to them and they bumped fists for a moment. "Damn that was **awesome!**"

"Awesome?!" Nami bellowed, her teeth changing into that of a shark as she smacked Luffy upside the head. "Awesome, that was the most terrifying thing I've ever heard of!"

Luffy shrugged his shoulders, not acknowledging the hit. "Whitebeard's not all that bad. In fact going from that discussion and what Ace told us, I think he's a regular old softy in comparison to the other three Yonkou. Let alone the WG. Cheer up Nami, this is all part of the adventure we're on!"

OOOOOOO

"...And it is likely that Doberman will never walk again unaided let alone use his arms. The damage is so extensive, that it will be a minor miracle if he'll even be able to lift his arms, let alone fight ever again. Akainu has submitted his name for use in the Pacifista project, but it remains to be seen if his body will be compatible with the procedure." An old man said scowling angrily as he put down the report he had been reading aloud to look around him.

He was a tall, tanned man with wide shoulders, blond hair, and a neat goatee. There was a large scar visible under his shirt running up into his neckline.

"The marines severely underestimated this Monkey D. Luffy," said another old man, kneading his forehead over a pair of large spectacles. In one hand he held a long, sheathed sword, the length of which was like a broadsword, but the blade was made more like a normal katana. "It's a pity he wasn't very well known before this, we could offer to make him a Shichibukai if so."

"He is entirely too unknown, though that won't last once it is known he defeated a Vice-Admiral. That information at least we can share with the common public and not further rock the pillars of power. Indeed we probably should in order to explain away the size of his bounty now." Another old man said, standing perfectly still and staring out a nearby window. Other than his beard, which was made to look like three daggers pressed together, there was nothing odd about him that would force anyone to notice him in a crowd.

"I'll have the Marines start issuing a statement to that effect set another Oyaji, with shaggy hair done in ringlets around his head and a wimple on his head. He had a thick cane in

his hand he was leaning on at present, sitting forward on his chair as he looked around at the four other old men in the room. "They're already looking for a replacement."

These men were the Gorosei, the Five elder stars. They were the heads of the World Government, the most powerful men in the world. It was their word that made laws, set the marines in motion or the assassinations of the World Government. And at present they were all rather angry. Though oddly enough most of their anger wasn't directed at Luffy. Yes, they were irritated that the marines had failed in killing or apprehending him, but most of their anger was directed at Luffy's former enemy.

"Damn Crocodile! Does he know nothing about the balance of forces in the world? Thanks to his stupidity, the world's peace is vulnerable!"

OOOOOOO

"...This is unusual," said Sengoku, looking on as Dracule Mihawk marched in, taking his place at the table. Not just because his presence was unanticipated, but Sengoku had noticed that the world's greatest Swordsman was looking a little frayed around the edges.

Catching Sengoku's look at him, Dracule simply shrugged. "A sudden bout of violence beset me yesterday. But I am here. I have a certain interest in the pirate group that caused this incident."

"Now that's just **fascinating**," said a drawling sort of voice, and Mihawk turned, looking at the speaker with his hawk-like eyes. That look would have set normal men running, but Doflamingo was anything but a normal man.

The other Shichibukai simply looked at Mihawk with interest, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses as normal. "What could a rookie crew have done to interest you? Or is it just the fact they beat Crocodile?"

"My interest in them is my own," Dracule said simply, turning away as if Doflamingo was of little importance, looking over at Sengoku.

Doflamingo glared, his fingers twitching, but before he could do anything Sengoku spoke again. "Enough! We are here to discuss the replacement for Crocodile, not the crew that dispatched him. They will be dealt with soon enough, i have dispatched fleets to find, pin them down and then exterminate them already. Right now, does anyone have a suggestion as to who we should invite to join you Shichibukai scum?"

"Ahem, may I interrupt here?"

The people at the large table turned, none of them evincing any surprise at the voice or the individual who stood on the outer balcony by one of the windows. All of them had known

he was there, but had discounted him as any sort of threat. "And who exactly are you?" Sengoku asked, one eyebrow raised behind his glasses.

OOOOOOO

"God dammit, will it ever stop raining!?" Luffy shouted at the top of her lungs while she worked the sails with Sanji and Zoro. All three of them looked bedraggled but Luffy, with her longer hair, looked more like a drowned rat than the other two at present.

"Probably not until tomorrow night at the least," Nami said cheerfully from underneath an awning by the wheel.

Luffy glared over at her and muttered, "that's an extra 20 minutes of training for you."

Somehow over the wind and rain Nami heard the redhead and paled, while the others nearby working on the rigging chuckled, even Sanji. Indeed, he was looking a little twitchy. Having been out in the rain so long had forced him to forgo his smoking for at least half a day now, and he was having serious withdrawal issues.

That first day after they had broken off from Bon's pirate crew had turned out to be the equivalent of the Grand Line giving them a mercy time out. Afterwards the weather of the Grand Line had begun to rear its ugly head once more and Luffy had after the third day of constant rain, snow and sleet, decided that she would not even try to tempt fate anymore by trying to change back into his male body when she was off duty.

This had of course had an impact on the training regimen for both him/herself Luffy had wanted to push to the next level as well as for everyone else:

"Oh, how can I be expected to fight such a delicate flowOOW!" Sanji shouted, holding his hand up to his forehead.

Luffy hefted another musket ball in his hand, grinning evilly at the cook. "You want to repeat that?"

"No," Sanji muttered. The entire idea of even fighting Luffy in his female form was anathema to his sense of chivalry, but he had learned via several painful lessons since he had joined this crew not to let his chivalrous instincts overcome his common sense when dealing with the redhead.

Looking around Luffy nodded to Robin, Nami and Makino who stood nearby. The four of them and Sanji stood in the center of the hold, the bags of money, gold and supplies all pushed to the sides, disorganizing the hold badly but creating an open area they could use to practice this lesson.

All of them, even Luffy, were wearing bikinis all of which had been bought by Nami back in Alabasta. Combined they looked like any man's wet dream come to life... right up until said male noticed the smirks they all wore. At that point the dream would become a nightmare.

"Ready?" At the nods and smiles from the other girls, Luffy held up her hand. "Remember this exercise won't end until you can bring yourself to actually attack one of the others Sanji, I know you've gotten over it with me so don't just luanch at me. Until then, we're going to continue pelting you with musket balls. And...go!"

"Oh this is going to be utterly shitty," Sanji muttered then began to dodge, trying to force his feed forward towards one of the ladies but unable to just yet.

And of course there was more general training too:

"You ready Zoro?" Luffy asked.

Zoro grunted, pulling on his damp bandanna and sticking Wado Ichimonji's hilt into his mouth as he crossed his other two blades in front of him. At present he was the only one standing on the Revenge's deck. Luffy and Sanji were hopping along beside it the three of them making a sort of triangle shape as they glared at one another.

Nearby Chopper stood waiting for his turn, his fur matted to his body by the rain but he still didn't look quite as rain-soaked as the three humans did. "Ready, go!" He shouted, and the three of them attacked one another, fists and feet flying, sword slashing through the air.

Like Luffy, Zoro and Sanji both learned better actually fighting one another, but it was something they couldn't do inside the schooner unless they wanted to strip out the cannons from one of its two decks. None of them were willing to do that after the battle against the Marines. They had been able to create an obstacle course and other things of that nature inside before they even reached Alabasta, but actual room for sparring they would have to use the deck for, but Luffy had decided that wasn't enough exercise.

So he had decided that the trio of main combatants would get more out of it if they also had to work on their Geppo at the same time, and it had worked tremendously well. Sanji's ability in Geppo had become almost second nature to him now, and his kicks were so powerful that even Luffy felt them if they got through his defenses. They weren't near to breaking Tekkai, but Luffy estimated they would be within another few weeks. Zoro's ability in it had also climbed dramatically, to where he could use it and fight at the same time. IT wasn't his preferred style, but he could use it to good effect.

Chopper and the girls had a somewhat easier time of it the girls since Makino and Robin had won an argument with Luffy on how they could be trained. Chopper in contrast worked on upper body muscle strength with Zoro for at least four hours a day, and then with Luffy for two hours a day on sparring practice but he wasn't being trained on Geppo just yet. Given that he

was a Devil Fruit user if he fell into the ocean it was quite a bit more dangerous for him than if Luffy or Sanji did. And with the weather as bad as it was no one wanted to chance it.

He had actually volunteered to try it anyway, but Luffy had vetoed the little guy. "Just because I want to train you hard, doesn't mean I want to train you stupid Chopper. No way am I going to risk you like that it. Though," he said holding up a hand as Chopper began to blush and stammer that he wasn't happy at all that Luffy felt that way, "I **will** work you extra hard the moment we get to an island."

Makino and Robin had pointed out that the girls didn't learn in the same manner as the boys and were excused sparring practice in lieu of other things. Makino took Nami under her belt the day the weather turned against them, training her with guns every morning and then in dodging training the rest of the time. Unfortunately, it turned out that Nami had little training and no eye for using guns.

Looking down at the marker that she had just retrieved from the other end of the gun deck, Makino walked back to Nami shaking her head. "You can spot minute changes in wind and weather and predict when it will change even here on the Grand Line but you can't hit a target with a pistol?"

"Oh hush," Nami said, shoving the older woman slightly with one hand. "How long did it take you to get as good as you are?"

Makino looked away sheepishly. "No comment."

The fact is, Makino reflected as the two of them began to set up the obstacle course for the next hour or so of training, *that my fighting abilities are near or at the peak of where they will ever be. The abilities of this crew are still growing.* Makino knew she had skill in other things, reading people, understanding them, a certain amount of willpower and organizational ability which came from running a bar for so many years on her own. But as an actual fighter Makino knew that she would eventually be left behind by even Nami.

Nami herself didn't see it, but the girl **was** getting better. Not so much as a gun user, but her ability to dodge, and her strength both in her legs and arms were slowly rising from where they had been when she joined the crew. She just wasn't a monster like the four boys.

Robin worked with Makino and Nami in the afternoon on dodging practice and leg exercises and trained with Luffy extensively in the morning after breakfast. She had come up with a few ways to use traps and unmanned toys to create a training area for Observation Haki and she knew quite a bit about meditation. She had never really gotten into the idea of reaching out to the world around them before, but she had read a lot of books which did. So with that and Luffy's own starting point they felt they could make progress.

In return Luffy had begun training her on Tekkai:

Luffy looked at frowned been quizzically that first evening shaking her head sheepishly. "Sorry, but there's no easy way of doing this. I mean I'm just going to have to basically hit you as you try to concentrate and tense your body until you can figure out how to do it. It will help build up your endurance, but it isn't exactly painless."

Shaking her head Robin replied. "I'm no stranger to pain, though I will admit this is the first time I've actually trained like this. And the idea of simply letting someone hit me is rather counter-intuitive."

"Hmmm...In that case, maybe we shouldn't truck start right off with Tekkai. Maybe we should start with actual combat styles instead?"

Robin shook her head. "I'm not a pugilist, nor am I a kick fighter."

"Kickboxer," Luffy corrected.

"Whatever!" Robin said with a laugh. She was laughing more often these days, she reflected, before speaking up aloud. "That doesn't matter. My point was that I usually let my powers do my fighting for me and there is no style out there which would work with the ability to create feet, hands and other things around me and my enemies. If I have to rely on a personal combat style, then I am already losing."

"So you want to join Nami in figuring out how to use Geppo, Soru, and Kami-E?"

"Yes," Robin said with a nod. "That makes more sense."

"Fine I suppose," Luffy replied, then smiled a little. "However, what if I told you I could find a martial art style for you?"

Robin made a get on with it gesture and Luffy smiled even wider. "It's called Aikido, or the gentle fist, and it works primarily by using your opponents strengths against him. Wait here."

The redhead went to fetch Chopper, Sanji and Zoro, who joined them under in the gun deck, with Sanji promptly bowing towards Robin. "Does the lady want for anything at the moment?"

"Thank you chef-san, but no," Robin said politely. "I believe the captain asked you down here to help you demonstrate something he might want to teach me."

"I hope this doesn't involve hurricaning Robin in any way," Sanji said mildly, though there was nothing mild about the fires in his eyes as he turned and glared at Luffy.

"Hurricaning?" Luffy asked deadpan. *How does he change his eyes like that?*

"Meh, you gotta admit it leaves an impression Luffy," Zoro grunted.

"Heh, well no, this is about learning a martial art style. It's called Aikido, any of you hear of it?"

Zoro frowned. "I've heard that name before, but I don't know any of it." the others all shook their heads.

"Yeah it's definitely not your style Zoro," Luffy replied with a laugh. "It's not entirely a defensive style it is a subtle one, and the three of us, we don't do subtle. You'll see."

She moved into the center of the gun deck then took a stance, one hand held forward from the body in an open palm, the other one up by Luffy's head also in an open palm. She stood loose, there was no tenseness in her body whatsoever as she looked around at the others. "Attack me," Luffy said simply.

The three of them looked at one another, and then as one said "gladly."

They all raced forward, with Chopper swiftly changing from his normal form into his Heavy Point. His hoof flashed forward in a punch that segued into a massive fist aimed not towards the knees that he had seemed to be aiming for but Luffy's face. Sanji move forward with a kick aimed for the back of Luffy's head. Zoro simply charged forward, going for a straight punch towards Luffy's chest.

Luffy seemed to bend up around what the first blow which was Sanji's. it almost looked like she had used Kami-E but she wasn't quite. Her open palm came up directing Sanji's kick above her head, while at the same time Luffy whirled, using her other hand to redirect Chopper's charge into Zoro. A light kick towards Zoro's legs later and both of them went down in a heap.

Sanji quickly flipped in midair, and came down with an axe kick. But once more Luffy simply dodged to the side, one hand going towards Sanji's pivot leg, disrupting it enough to send him scrolling as well.

This kind of thing continued for several moments, with none of the other three able to land a blow until Luffy called a halt. The three attackers were a little battered but Luffy had taken it easy on them. This was proven a moment later, when she ordered Zoro to volunteer to show some of the holds she could've used. "If you're strong enough, you could dislocate an elbow, arm, or shoulder like this," she said, holding up Zoro's hand up above his head, where Zoro had tried to throw another punch.

"You can also of course aim for his armpit, which is a bundle of nerve endings. Any hit there will take anyone's mind off of hurting you." "Interesting Robin replied, "I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask," Luffy said, releasing Zoro much to the swordsman's well-hidden relief. "For now though, I'm afraid it's time for your Tekkai training."

Robin move forward, and sat down in a cross-legged position, breathing in deeply and exhaling closing her eyes as she began to meditate. Then she tensed her body, and looked up at Luffy. "Ready."

Later that day Robin was regretting her decision, sore and bruised from head to toe or near enough. Luffy hadn't gone for her feet, but it surely felt as if someone had been hammering her with a series of different sized hammers all day.

"I did warn you..." Luffy said, wincing a little as she stepped back.

At that sign the training was over Robin gasped. Falling to the side of the deck for a moment Robin shook her head as her body screamed death threats to her mind. "You did, and I thought I was prepared for it," she said ruefully once she was certain she wouldn't simply shout invective at her captain or herself for agreeing to this.

Luffy scratched at her pigtail for a moment, then leaned down, and gently picked Robin up off the deck, holding Robin in her arms as she made for the hatch. Robin didn't protest this woman-handling, simply letting her head fall against Luffy shoulder as she murmured "where are we going?"

"I think your training's done for the day. I'll set you up in the ladies room, then get you your latest book from the dinning room. "Or do you think a shower will make you feel better?"

The schooner's shower facilities were still nothing to write home about, since Luffy didn't have enough pipes to redo the plumbing, and it had taken him a while to figure out how he wanted to change them around anyway, plumbing was tricky after all, especially on a ship. That would be one thing he would buy at their next stop, along with a bit more wood since the crew had gone through most of the Resolve's stock after the battle.

"A lie down sounds wonderful," Robin replied. "Could you get Makino or Nami, i'd love a massage."

"Doubt it. Nami's at the wheel right now, and Makino is asleep. She was on watch last night, remember? I suppose I could give you one..." Luffy said hesitantly.

"Really?" Robin asked, leaning away slightly so she could turn her head up to look at the redhead's face.

"Sure. I did the same thing for Nami when she started the toughness training."

"Oh you did?" Robin said. She had intended her voice to come up as merely curious. Yet Robin knew it that had come out a little more accusatory than she had wanted.

Luffy didn't seem to notice, simply nodding, busy as she was with her own thoughts. Massaging Nami had been tough in a lot of ways, but doing the same to Robin would probably be worse in some ways, easier in others. *Thank goodness I'm in my female form, and Robin ain't the type to tease me.*

"In that case i agree. You did the damage, so you get to help me feel better after."

"That's fair," Luffy said with a somewhat forced laugh, causing Robin to chuckle..

As she lay down on her bed, Robin debated whether or not to change her clothing in preparation for this massage. She eventually decided against it however. It wasn't that she was ashamed of her body, far from it. But even with Luffy in his female body Robin wasn't certain where that would go, and that uncertainty plagued her somewhat.

Robin had never been involved emotionally with someone before. Physically she had been of course, Robin wasn't a virgin by any means and she had even been able to decide who she slept with the first time, something she knew was a rarity among pirate women. Nor was she a prude. Robin had had several lovers over her lifetime, though calling them lovers was a bit too fraught with emotional entanglements than any of those incidences had been.

Some of them had actually been good at it too which had made her rather sorrowful to turn on them the instant they had begun to plan to do the same to her. But such was life for a lone woman moving through the underworld of the Grand Ilne.

But this, this was new territory for her. She knew she was attracted to Luffy physically. She'd known that barely 2 days after meeting the man/woman. But the emotional attachment had begun to build a few days after that, and Robin wasn't certain how to deal with it. She wasn't certain if she should act on it, or not, or really what she was feeling at all. *Perhaps, perhaps I should take this chance? Perhaps I should truly embrace this crew as my nakama, like Saul said i'd find?*

The moment that thought entered her mind however she remembered Jaguar D. Saul's death, the burning of the Ohara behind her, and Aokiji, freezing a crew of pirates that she had used to get away from the next island along the chain. *No, she thought again. No I might like and respect this crew, but I can't... I need to prepare myself for the inevitable. If Aokiji learns that I am part of this crew given what else has happened they will come after us, and if that is the case then I will need to be ready to leave, if only to lead Aokiji away from my friends.*

That hurt. But for the first time, the thought of her personal bogeyman was accompanied by other thoughts along the lines of *'maybe you're selling them a little too short?'* and *'hasn't Luffy proven himself tough enough yet?'*

The moment where Luffy used Haoshoku to knock out the Millions came back to Robin, the feel of the beast Luffy kept chained inside. And for a moment the images warred in her mind with one another, Luffy's proven strength and abilities on one side, against the deadliness of the Marine Buster Call and Aokiji on the other.

To these questions Robin had no answer, and their inner turmoil remained unresolved as Luffy began his ministrations.

Luffy straddled Robin's back, her thighs were directly on either side of Robin's own, putting no weight on her legs or rear as she raised her hands to the older woman's neck, starting there. *Fucking hormones, ugh, I know they effect me in both my forms but this is not the time for them! This is just a friend doing something to relieve a friend's pain, heh after causing it too so it really is only fair as Robin said.*

"Ahh... that feels nice," Robin murmured, feeling Luffy's small feminine hands on her neck. She winced as those hands gripped her neck and pulled it to one side, making Robin realize just then how vulnerable she was, and had chosen to be in front of this man/woman, her captain. But Luffy had done that to help get a kink out and her fingers swiftly kneaded it out of existence. "Mm... didn't realize how tense I was..."

"Hah, given you were just practicing tensing your body that shouldn't be a surprise Robin." Luffy murmured in a low voice. One hand went down Robin's back, pressing and kneading there while Luffy's other hand moved to her shoulders, trying hard not to get too into it despite her hormones arguing the point. Even through her clothing the feel of Robin underneath Luffy was alluring in the extreme, and the touches of skin on skin contact Luffy had while working on Robin's neck only added to it.

"What do you do to keep your skin so soft?" Luffy asked, trying to keep her mind on anything but the curve of Robin's rear under hers.

"Mmm... I make my own lotion out of aloe and some other things." Robin replied arching her back as Luffy found a sore point between her shoulder blades then moaning as Luffy worked out the knot. "I can make some for you if you like?"

"Nah, not for me, but Nami and Makino have complained about dry skin a few times. Figure it's my job as captain to make problems go away, large or small." Luffy replied.

Robin chuckled at that. "Mmmm, I think your definitions of both problem and captain are different than anything I've experienced before. Not thaaaamm... that it's a bad thing. Ohhh right there..."

Simply nodding Luffy continued to work on Robin's side, which was particularly sore and bruised. She had to be careful given the bruising but that had been true all along and hadn't stopped her yet. "Good?"

Hearing Robin's groaning reply, Luffy moved on to her thighs. No more words were exchanged, the two of them falling into a comfortable, almost intimate silence as Luffy continued to work and Robin slowly began to drift off into sleep.

As her eyes began to close in to sleep and Luffy's massage continued, Robin fell asleep with a smile. At the same time the thought, *maybe some things are worth trying, even if the might end up hurting me in the end* went through her head.

Robin and the others got their revenge on Luffy the day after that massage. With Makino and Chopper on duty outside, Robin joined the others in the training room, where Luffy took his place in the center. All of them carried large staves save Zoro, who had retrieved two of the throwaway swords from their hold.

"Okay, so... this is training my Busoshoku endurance." Luffy said hesitantly, for once back in his male body for this. As they watched his skin turning shiny black. "Um... have at me."

The crew all grinned even Robin, raising their weapons. "This will hurt you a lot more than us captain~," Nami said teasingly. "But remember your favorite phrase, no pain, no gain."

"Just not the eyes!" Luffy shouted, before his crew descended on him.

OOOOOOO

Eventually the weather finally began to clear, a day dawning bright and sunny for the first time since the day after they had split off from the Okama pirate. At the time Robin and Chopper were on deck. Robin was up in the crow's nest, and Chopper was manning the wheel as Nami and the other slowly came out, acting almost like they were afraid coming out on deck would somehow signal the Grand Line that it should restart the bad weather.

Luffy looked at Nami hopefully, her eyes wide and her hands together as if she was begging or perhaps praying. Luffy was used to his female body by this point, and though he would never say it to anyone else had actually begun to see the benefits of it in some ways. But that didn't mean he was ever entirely comfortable in it, which said nothing about the downside of spending so much time in that body.

The navigator looked around, staring up into the sky in every direction for a few moments, then all around them before she finally nodded. "Were going to get some nasty wind soon, but I don't see anything to indicate the rain or anything that can trigger your curse will come at us today captain," she said formally, though her lips were twitching in an effort to not grin at the other woman.

"Hallelujah!" Luffy shouted throwing her arms in the air and hopping back inside quickly.

"But don't you want to at least sunbathe with us?" Makino asked after her, only to have to dodge a plate that the aquatranssexual had grabbed from the table as she passed. Makino and Nami exchanged a laugh while the rest of the crew slowly began to come outside eager to have a nice day for once.

Halfway through the day Sanji and Luffy were high up above the ship, practicing their Geppo combat against one another when Sanji called a halt out of the blue. "Hold on."

Luffy looked at him, then turned and looked in the same direction Sanji was looking. Three ships were coming over the horizon in the direction the Resolve was currently heading, and from up here the two pirates could spot their colors. "Marines," Sanji growled shaking his head.

"Dodge!" Luffy ordered suddenly, canceling his Geppo for a split second.

Sanji quickly did the same, staring at Luffy then up into the air as twin whizzing sounds reached him, something small and moving very fast passing through where they had previously been. "What was that?"

"A speed coin attack like that Doberman guy tried to use on me. The name varies," Luffy said, then danced to one side, literally rolling in midair and down a bit before getting his feet under him again and reactivating his Geppo. The two Pirates exchanged a glance and Luffy grinned cracking his knuckles. "Someone's picking a fight."

"It would be ungentlemanly not to reply," Sanji said with an equally eager grin.

"Come on, let go warn the others," Luffy ordered, canceling his Geppo in stages not so much hopping down as dropping down in large clumps towards the Resolve. The two of them landed down on one of the main masts crossbars, nodding to Zoro who was on watch. As they landed both men took a moment to stare down at the three ladies who had taken this opportunity to get some sun very seriously indeed.

Nami was laying on her back, her bikini top undone so as not to give her any lines, her pert heart-shaped rear covered with a barely there string bikini. Her skin glistened with the sunscreen she had put on before laying down.

A V-cut one piece bikini, Robin's suit was slightly more conservative at first glance. But with her slightly fuller look and the fact she was laying on her back rather than her chest it left just as little to the imagination. Her bronze skin needed no help to gleam in the sunlight.

And Luffy did not even look towards more where Makino wore an equally barely there bathing suit. Such things were what horror stories were made of. He'd had enough problems when he noticed the suit for the first time, he had no wish to see his big sister figure actually wearing it.

Sanji on the other hand took in Makino's form just as avidly as the other two, his eyes heart shapes. Makino was laying on her back like Robin, wearing a bathing suit slightly more conservative than Nami's, it's blue and gold stripes standing out on her white skin, bringing attention to her rock hard abs and womanly hips if not her smaller chest in relation to the other two.

"Oy!" Zoro grunted, interrupting the other two's staring. "What brought you two done so fast?"

"Oh yeah," Luffy muttered, shaking his head to rid it of the images of acres of flesh below.

Sanji did the same on the other side of Zoro, then stared at his captain in shock. "Wait, you actually have a libido!?"

"Shut up!" Luffy growled while Zoro and Sanji laughed.

None of the boys noticed Robin smiling slightly from her position, having noticed their arrival and their attention.

A moment later, however Luffy had moved past that to more important things. "Up and at them folks, three Marine ships coming in dead ahead!"

Nami quickly push yourself off of the folding chair where she had been sunning, reaching behind her and doing up her top before moving over to the wheel. "I'll turn us a little to starboard, we can run ahead of them for a time when wind picks up in a few minutes. We were going to have to fight it but if we actually go with it, we can leave the Marines behind quickly."

Luffy shook his head. "We're already within range apparently, whoever is over there can use that finger bomb trick that Doberman tried on me, he took me and Sanji under fire when we were in the air. It's a line of sight thing, but I'd bet if we try to get away he'll come after us via Geppo and if that attack hits the ship..." Luffy left that thought hanging for a moment then went on. "We can't get away clean."

"And who would want to anyway?" Zoro asked, stretching his arms above his head and then letting one hand rest on his three sword hilts for a moment. "If they're picking a fight, I say we give them one."

"I thought you were trying not to think with your fists all the time," Nami said accusingly staring up at Luffy, crossing her arms under her breasts and smirking as Luffy looked away before she paused. "Wait, from dead ahead? They weren't after us at all? Are we near a Marine base?" Nami asked looking over at Robin, who was making her way down the stairs, intent on changing clothing if they were going to get into a fight.

Robin paused to think for a moment before she shook her head. "No, but there are a few Marine flotillas around. Is it two galleons and a schooner, or some other grouping?"

"Three schooners," Luffy replied promptly.

"Then we might not have been able to get away anyway," Nami grouched. "Not if they have someone like you and Sanji can stay in the air and spot for them, setting aside the threat of these coin attacks of yours if they come within visual range. Darn it."

"Don't worry, this isn't a fight to the end or anything like that. Sanji, Zoro, you're with me. The rest of you do as Nami says, just stay away from them for now over the horizon, if you see them, start moving the ship as wildly as you can. We'll do the rest," Luffy replied.

OOOOOOO

"Stop dodging, damn it!" Shouted a rather old Marine captain into the air at the same time Luffy and Sanji were dodging around. He was darkly tanned, with a wide thick-lipped mouth and silver blond hair. He had leather wrappings around his forearms and hands, including several of his fingers, which were currently a blur as he tried to tag Sanji in midair where the cook was dodging. "This is so frustrating! Can we point any of the cannons up there?"

A Marine nearby saluted crisply but answered in the negative. "Apologies captain but they aren't even in range yet. Your finger bomb has a longer range than our cannons, and is quite a bit more accurate. Are you sure they are even pirates sir?"

"Only when the person isn't dodging all over the place!" The Marine Captain grouched before answering his subordinate's question. "As to who they are, no other Marine unit should be in the area, and that leaves pirates, pirates who know Geppo, which means they aren't just nobodies. Put on more sail, let's see if we can catch their ship up."

Just then the figures in the air disappeared, dropping out of sight over the horizon. The captain scowled ordering on more and more sail until they finally hove to over the horizon from their target.

The man up in the crow's nest, an equally old, somewhat disheveled looking lieutenant, held a spyglass to his eye and shouted down at the captain. "It is a pirate ship, mark is that of a straw hat on a grinning skull and crossbones, with what looks like a pigtail or something."

"That is the flag is that of the new rookie Straw Hat Luffy! Shouted an intelligence officer nearby, an old, somewhat overweight officer.. 160,000,000 beli, proceed with extreme caution."

The news about Dobermans defeat had not been shared with all the small flotillas even around Alabasta just yet, or else the orders might well have been 'avoid or follow at a respectable distance' rather than simply 'proceed with caution'.

And these three Marine crews might well have been served better to actually listen to even that little bit of advice from higher up. Instead, the three schooners spread out, trying to come at the still approaching pirate vessel from every angle so that it couldn't suddenly cut and run. It seemed to be trying to, swiftly shifting to starboard and away the wind with it rather than with the Marines. But the pirate's navigator seemed to have waited too long, and the captain nodded grimly.

"We'll catch up to them in a moment," said a feminine voice nearby. The woman, another lieutenant, moved toward her captain, whispering into his ear. "Have you forgotten what we need to do here?"

The captain lowered his arm from where he had been about to fire a finger bomb at the pirate ship to look at the woman next to him. "I haven't, but darn it how are we supposed to let them get away if..." Just then he looked up abruptly, hearing a whistling noise.

OOOOOOO

Luffy, Sanji and Zoro had hopped off the back of the Resolve and then on an angle away from the ship and the incoming Marines, until they were well out of sight of even anyone on the deck of the roof Resolve before hopping higher and higher up in the air and doubling back. Soon enough they were each above a Marine vessel and began to drop down on top of them, with Luffy in the lead.

"Banzai!" Luffy shouted, actually canceling his Geppo technique entirely and flipping himself head down, diving like a swooping hawk through the air.

"Our captain's fucking crazy!" Zoro laughed, a little unnerved by how high the three of them were the moment, though he would never show it.

Sanji chuckled, flicking away his cigarette and lighting a new one before taking along puff. "Maybe, but it works." With that he canceled his own technique, dropping feet first not head first like Luffy, straight down towards the second schooner.

Growling Zoro followed, pulling his swords as he prepared himself.

Coming out of the sun and from an angle directly over the Marine vessels, the result of their sudden attack was total chaos. The Marines barely had a few seconds to hear the whistle of Luffy's approach through the air before he flipped himself back up right and started to slow down right over the ship. Before even the captain could attack him Luffy brought his hands forward slashing out Rankyaku attacks not at the Marines, but at the masts.

Off to one side Sanji did the same, lashing out with one leg while retaining his use of Geppo with the other. At the same time Zoro used his own long-range attack on Luffy's other side. Within seconds, all three schooners were demasted and listing badly. The masts and accompanying rigging had toppled over their sides slowly turning the three schooners in the water as the Marines scrambled for cover shouted, screamed and tried to bring their rifles to bare with little effect.

Just as he finished the attack Luffy ducked his head to one side as another finger bomb sent a penny through where his head had been, landing on the prow of the ship and scowling at the Marine who had launched it. "I would've thought the demonstration just now would've told you to stop trying to fight us! All we're trying to do is sail on, we didn't go looking for trouble here. And I figure Marines in this area at the very least would've been told not to try anything with us except with overwhelming force, which three ships **aren't**."

The Marines on this ship all growled and raised their guns and swords, but their captain held up a hand, shouting at the top of his lungs to be heard by the other ships too. "That's enough! He just destroyed our rigging, think about what could've happened if he had had any of you without attack."

"You would've gone swimming," Luffy said 'helpfully', smirking at them all. "That wasn't a sharp Rankyaku but a blunt one. Whoever I'd hit with it would be bruised for days but if you got them out of the drink fast enough they'd still be alive."

"How about this then?" the Marine captain said, stepping forward. "If you think you're so honorable, how about a fight between captains instead of our crews?"

Luffy looked at the older man thoughtfully then nodded slowly. "I'm game." With that he hopped backwards off the ship, hopping in midair until he was once more hovering slightly above the ships deck. "If you are come and get me."

The Marine Captain threw off his captain's cloak and then charged forward, leaping into the air and moving towards Luffy with his own Geppo. The two swiftly exchanged punches a few times, but Luffy could already tell that this captain, while a tough old sod, wasn't even up to Smoker's standard without his logia let alone Hina.

This was merely a face-saving gesture from a man who had made a mistake, knew it and wanted to save his crews. Luffy could understand that and decided to go easy on the old guy, smashing his hand upwards and hitting him in the chin with a regular punch rather than his Amiguriken or Haki-infused punch. It still rattled the old man's teeth, and threw his head back hard, but he shook it off like a trooper and came in again.

"There's actually something I want from you." The man growled under his breath inaudible to anyone looking on from the three damaged ships.

"Other than my head?" Luffy quipped, wondering what the old guy was talking about.

"I don't want your head at all! I know I'm not strong enough to take it anyway. But, there's something I need a pirate crew to do which Marines can't be involved in, at least not right away."

"You want me to do some dirty work for you?" Luffy asked incredulously. "You've got balls old guy, but why the hell should I listen to you?"

"Because you're going to Ruluka Island anyway. Besides, what will it hurt you to hear me out?"

"Hearing you out costs me nothing. The question is, what will be in it for me and my crew?"

"I don't know. Are you pirates interested in beating up a corrupt mayor? While the locals probably look the other way as you make off with some of his treasure?" the marine captain replied, a smirk on his wide, thick lips.

OOOOOOO

"...So that old captain, Rapa-something, has heard rumors about the mayor of this town apparently being an old pirate. But the townsfolk either don't know or won't testify, so his hands are officially tied. Weird, but not entirely out there. What really interested me though was that he passed on some stories about special weapons this Whetton guy and his bully-boys use, which sounds like things we could make use of in the future." Luffy concluded, looking around at the crew.

By this point the Resolve was well away from the near-to stranded marines having left them floundering behind them. Now it was pushing nighttime and all of the crew were once more around the wheel which had turned into the crew's impromptu meeting place, for important discussions anyway. Parties happened down on the main deck.

"After he told me about it I knocked him out, dropped him back on his ship and came back here to talk to you all. It sounds like a chance to make some easy cash, and get our hands on some unique weapons, especially since we are going to this Ruluka Island anyway, right?"

"I like the idea of easy cash!" Nami said cheerfully, before sobering. "Besides, if this mayor really is an ex-pirate exploiting the people of Ruluka, that hits a little too close to home for me."

Sanji bowed grandly towards her before standing upright, flicking the ashes off his cigarette. "If Nami-chan agrees, then so do I. We could also use some more greens and red

meats too. Feeding the Okama pirates and this past week have put us below where I'd like to see our supplies be."

"You're the captain Luffy, if you say we should get involved in this, we will," Zoro said, putting his and Chopper's opinion plain. Robin was looking thoughtful, but remained silent for now. Luffy had noticed that she often did that: when Robin didn't know exactly what to say, she simply stayed silent, watching everything around her.

"Then in that case, I think it's time to do some pirating Robin Hood style," Luffy said with a laugh.

Robin started at that, then laughed as Chopper looked at her innocently. "Ooh is that your real last name?"

"Ahh, no, Nico really is my last name." Robin replied, regaining her composure quickly. *The tales of Robin Hood. Now that is a very, very old tale and not one that has ever been published even in East Blue given its antiauthoritarian leanings. So where did Luffy hear of them?* "Exactly what kind of pirating would be 'Robin style'?" she asked probingly, though no one caught that.

"Take from the rich and give to the poor. Or in this case give to ourselves and the poor at the same time if this Whetton guy's been taxing his folk so hard. When we ransack his mansion we can turn over most of his ill-gotten gains to the locals and keep the weapons. This little bit of pillaging isn't just about the cash after all." Luffy said.

"Bite your tongue Luffy, it's always about the gold." Nami retorted, scowling at the very idea anyone would think different while Robin merely nodded, adding another tally to the list of clues she was gathering about Luffy's training.

OOOOOOO

"I think the negotiations went well. That punk doesn't seem the sort to not get involved in anything that can bring him a fight, which matches my memory of him," the captain of the marines Ranma had dueled said. It hadn't been much of a duel the man reflected, smiling ruefully at his friends as they gathered around his bed in the medical room. "At least that's my read on him, and I hope it's accurate, or I just got my rear kicked in for nothing."

the Five officers around him laughed at that. But then one looked out the door to the rest of the captain's flagship, where the wreckage of the destroyed masts had been cleared over the side, leaving the schooner without sail but at least free to move. Beyond that was his own ship and the third in the flotilla, which was in similar straits. "Erm, that's nice and all, but did he have to destroy our masts like that? We'll be days behind them!"

OOOOOOO

Ruluka Island seemed to have a decent cove almost enclosed by high rocky cliffs which squeezed the entrance to barely the size of two schooners abreast. As they entered this break in the rock the ship was hailed by a guard on duty outside a watchtower. The watch tower in question was short and almost squat, but it had several cannons pointing down into the entrance to the cove. "Halt! All ships who enter Ruluka Island must pay a tax, 20,000 beli per masthead."

Luffy shrugged his shoulders. "What if we drop anchor away from the port? That way we're not even using any of the island's services." At the same time, he looked at Robin, twitching his head toward the tower.

Realizing what he wanted, Robin crossed her arms sending several eyes up the outside of the watchtower then into it's interior before shaking her head. An instant later she formed a mouth right behind Luffy's ear, whispering "I've taken care of the fellows behind the cannons."

Luffy blushed as he felt Robin's breath on his ear like that, causing her to turn away and hide a giggle. Now was not the time for such things.

This was proven a moment later as the man brought his rifle up to his shoulder, pointing it at Makino. "NO one passes without paying the tax!"

Growling, Luffy hopped into the air quickly ascending to the same height as the gob-smacked man. He was wearing some kind of uniform in purple complete with some odd marking and a helmet, so was obviously a local soldier of some kind. But Luffy couldn't care less about that, and simply chopped down on the man's helmeted head once, sending him to the ground. "He sees our flags and assumes we're going to pay a toll? Come on! I mean, sure, if he knew us it'd be one thing, but he thinks pirates will be willing to pay some random..."

"Hey, you there!" shouted a voice, interrupting Luffy's monologue. He turned to see a very old man with a very odd backpack and helmet getup come stumbling up the short path that led to the watchtower.

"Best you slow down old-timer before that backpack of yours has you over the side," Luffy said, moving forward quickly and grabbing the old guy just as his prediction came true. "There, ya see. Now, what's got you running around with this much stuff on your back huh?" To Luffy/Ranma's eyes it looked like some kind of portable radar device. *Though that might just be the small radar dish sticking up over one shoulder, who knows?*

The old man huffed and puffed, but then got right into Luffy's face and shouted, "That ship, can I borrow that ship!?"

Blinking Ranma backed away, slightly so the old man wouldn't get spittle on his face. "Um, why don't ya come on down and talk to me and my crew old man. Then you only need to explain what you mean by that once."

The old man was apparently named Henzo. He was a scientist trying to figure out the Rainbow Mist, which had historically appeared in the area around Ruluka island several times, though only once before in his lifetime. He was ostensibly working for the mayor who the Straw Hats were here to 'investigate' but Makino and Nami could both tell there was something personal for the man.

"Robin? This Rainbow mist..." Chopper began, looking eagerly up at Robin, while Luffy's eyes narrowed. The reindeer man looked utterly gleeful, grinning and hugging his hat to himself.

Robin in turn didn't look any more excited than normal at first glance. But her eyes were shining, she was leaning forward on her the guardrail she was sitting on and her hands were tapping an eager rhythm on her knees. "So, the Rainbow Mist is real?"

Henzo blinked, looking at her and the others. "How do you know about it?"

Robin waved a hand and a series of hands appeared from her, stretching to the hatch into the interior of the ship. As Henzo gibbered in shock, Robin explained. "I read a series of adventures written by someone who attempted to explore the Rainbow Mist. It could be a treasure trove of information at the very least, of technology and riches at the most." *It might not help me find a clue to the Rio Poneglyph, but it will be fascinating at the very least.*

"Technology?" Nami asked, looking over at Robin.

But it was Luffy who answered. "The Rainbow Mist apparently traps boats and crews within it from different times, and keeps them all in the same alternate dimension or something, where time doesn't really work the same as in the real world. Do I have that right?" he asked, looking at Robin.

Robin nodded. "Yes, that is what the books imply. The Explorer who wrote them tell of ships from long in the past in the same chapter where he talks of fanciful ships that 'looked almost as if they would be at home in the air or under the sea'. So at the very least the Rainbow Mist and it's alternate dimension, which is called Ape's Concert, have captured ships from the North Blue's most advanced islands. Or perhaps from the future entirely, it is hard to say."

"And how did you know about that Luffy?" Nami asked her eyes narrowed, that weird feeling she sometime felt when Robin and Luffy were around one another coming back to her as she glanced between them.

"Robin told me about the series she's been reading, and how she had us steal three of the five volumes from Alubarna's library," Luffy said with a laugh. "But even Cobra and his family didn't have a copy of the last book in the series."

Nami nodded, though she still felt miffed for some reason.

It was decided that the crew would dock the schooner at the wharf rather than out to sea, then head into town to Doctor Henzo's laboratory, where they would further discuss the idea of exploring the Rainbow Mist. The town was built into the island's bluff along a series of ever-rising roads set into the hill like a zigzag, with the mayor's house high up over it all. The houses were simple affairs, looking somewhat like Alabasta's, and the roads were decently paved. The mayor's house was separated by a wall and was a decent size, and it had a very weird, squat looking tower set to one side all on it's own.

Doctor Henzo's observation point was set up quite a ways away from the town to the left of the wharf, only connected to the town via a simple walk path at the second turning in the road. When he saw that, Luffy whistled a little. "How the heck did you get down from your observation point to the watchtower so quickly?"

Henzo looked a little embarrassed then gestured to his backpack. "This has a hang glider in it. I flew down halfway then ran the rest. Of course my landing wasn't anything to write home about," He muttered. "Going to have to make some adjustments to it, add strength and try to keep the lightness, perhaps something with aluminum?"

Makino shuddered at the very idea and Chopper shook his head, remembering his own experience with flying from Rain Dinners to the capital of Alabasta on Pell's back. The others however especially the three boys looked interested. "Not that they couldn't fly around, but Geppo was work even for Luffy. Hang gliding simply sounded like fun.

The pleasant thoughts about that and whether or not they should purchase some hang gliders and use them in the future were interrupted by a banging and clanging of some kind of band coming down the road towards them from higher up it's length. Makino winced a little shaking her head and Robin deadpanned "oh my, is there an elementary school function of some sort today? Who let the challenged children have the cymbals?"

The others laughed, but Luffy also noticed that a lot of the locals had quickly entered their houses while others moved to the side of the roads, looking down and away. "I think," he said slowly we're about to see in our second example of the local mayor and his tyranny."

"So we're going to start something soon?" Zoro asked eagerly.

"Yeah probably," Luffy replied.

Nami just growled a little, angry at once more looking to start a fight rather than avoid one.

But before she could speak up Luffy turned to her. "Nami, Makino, Chopper and Sanji disappear for a bit but don't forget to take a Den-Den Mushi. The four of you don't have wanted pictures, and I include you in that Sanji, yes. So let's not have you involved in anything with witnesses if we can avoid it."

Giving him a thumbs up Nami quickly disappeared down an alleyway between two houses, intending on skirting around the source of the noise which was coming toward them. Chopper, already in his normal reindeer body raced after her with Makino astride his back.

Behind them Sanji grinned, holding up his hands in a heart shape towards Luffy. "Nice grouping captain!" With that he raced off after Nami and Makino. "Wait for me ladies!"

The others waited while Robin looked down at Henzo. "Is there anything you wish to tell us?"

"Don't fight them!" Henzo said urgently. "You might've knocked out that guard, and have some very unusual powers, but you're no match for the mech-suits."

"That sounded like a challenge," Luffy said, while cataloging the term 'mech-suit', adding it to that marine captain had told them. One thing that had not changed from one life to the next however was that Ranma nee Luffy could not resist a challenge like that. He turned to Zoro holding up a fist. "Play rock paper scissors for it?"

"Hell no!" Zoro growled. "You got to fight both a Shichibukai and a vice admiral, and then my fight with that Marine Captain was interrupted! I get that this mayor and his top stooges at the least."

Luffy shrugged. "All right, I'll deal with the riffraff then I suppose."

By this time the noisemakers had come within sight and Luffy's prediction had been correct. They looked like a marching band mixed with an army, a very poorly trained band and an army that while armed didn't look all that tough. The banging of the cymbals was cacophonous rather than melodic and the troops had weapons, but certainly didn't carry them like they were expected trouble. That said there were over twenty of them. Only five or so were banging drums or cymbals, the others were armed with rifles and swords.

One man wasn't armed or holding an instrument. He strode ahead of the others, wearing a uniform that looked a little bit more elaborate than the others with gold piping on his shoulders and no helmet on his head. He had orange hair a little darker than Nami's and looked around Henzo's age, with a set of glasses perched on his nose.

Zoro, Robin, and Luffy stared at the group as they approached showing no fear anticipation or anything, simply looking on as if this was a play being put on for their benefit. It didn't take long for that look to do its work, and the officer in the lead marched straight up to them and looked them over. "Newcomers are you? I presume since your ship is docked you paid the entry tax, however there are others. First there is the landing tax, which is a thousand beli a head for every individual of your crew which has come ashore. Then there is the refurbishment tax, the wear and tear on the wharf needs to be repaired after every ship. That's an even two thousand per ship."

Then he paused and seemed to see Henzo for the first time. "Ah, but what do we have here! Doctor Henzo away from your observatory today?"

Henzo started to stammer, pointing at Luffy and the others. "Um, their crew and their ship is going to be instrumental in my progress from here on. They've already agreed to let me use it to investigate the oceans nearby you know I need more readings for my calculations to be accurate enough to aim the tower Philip-sama."

"That is true, but that doesn't mean that they are exempt from the taxes." The now-named man said haughtily.

Luffy shook his head. "You know, I've met a lot of officious assholes in my time, but most of them actually had eyes. Perhaps you should have noticed that our flag was that of a pirate crew?"

"He is wearing glasses," Robin said judiciously. "Perhaps he's farsighted?"

"I think it's those sideburns, They're squeezing his brain too much he can't think straight." Zoro supplied helpfully.

"Nice one!" Luffy said smacking Zoro on the shoulder. "We'll train you to be an expert in smack talk yet."

Hearing this exchange a few of the locals actually snickered while others looked terrified. But it was the snickers that Philip noticed, such men always noticed slights like that. "How dare you!? Men, arrest these tax evaders! Henzo you'll just have to do with their ship on its own."

Luffy took a single step forward, then launched from that one step into a leap past the man, lashing out to either side hurling the guards left and right. Behind him Robin quickly took a step to one side then crossed her arms slightly as hands appeared on half of the others. An instant later she squeezed her hands and sent them broken to the ground as her conjured hands obey Robin's command. She had concentrated on the ones that had their rifles on their shoulders primed and ready, figuring that they didn't want to cause any casualties from a stray musket ball.

For his part Zoro used Wado in its sheathe to smack Philip on the side of the head, sending him reeling. As Philip fell Zoro rushed forward to join Luffy in demolishing the rest. Within about 30 seconds, the entire column was dealt with.

Once the last man fell, Luffy made a point of reaching down and grabbing each instrument in turn. He then broke them before placing them back down next to their owners.

"I didn't know you were a music critic," Robin said archly, canceling her own powers and looking around distastefully at the scattered remains of... *What was this supposed to be, a patrol of some kind?* She wondered internally. *A show of force for certain aimed at the locals and any visitors. I would have thought that here on the Grand Line small fish would have had more sense than to make noise enough to attract a Sea King.*

"I'm not a critic but, but I know what I don't like!" Luffy said with a grin sent her way. "Hey you," he said to the nearest local, who was staring in a mixture of shock, fear and elation on his face at what had just occurred. "How long you figure until we get a response from the mayor because of this?"

"How, how am I supposed to know?!" the man squeaked and it was a squeak Luffy observed with amusement. "Nothing like this has ever happened before!"

Henzo however seemed to have come back on track a little after watching the crew in action. "The Mayor won't send out more troops after you. The mech-suits aren't very fast, and they require a bit of setup time as well. So they'll try to place themselves where you have to return to."

Luffy and Zoro exchanged a look. "The ship?"

Zoro nodded. "I'll head back there then. I still want an actual fight damn it, not a one sided beat down."

Luffy nodded, and watched as Zoro hopped into the air over the buildings grateful that he had and tried to take the road back. With his sense of direction, which had not yet been helped overmuch by Nami smasking navigation information into his head (at times literally), he might've just gotten lost despite the fact that this was a street which only had really two directions. But with the ship actually in sight, there was no way that was going to happen.

As Robin and Luffy turned to follow Henzo, he took out his Den-Den Mushi. "Sanji?"

"Here," the Den-Den Mushi responded, already shifting into a facsimile of Sanji's head, the chef's coif slowly growing out of the snail's head. "That was quick."

"Taking out the trash should never be a lengthy process," Robin drolly replied for Luffy causing Sanji to swoon, and Nami to laugh in the background. Chopper too laughed, his somewhat high voice noticeable and Luffy could almost picture Makino shaking her head in amused despair at their attitudes.

But when he spoke next, Luffy was a little more serious. "I'd like you three to stay hidden as long as possible, but if any of you want to join us when we get to Henzo's observation lab, you can do that. You all have money?"

When Sanji answered in the affirmative, Luffy ordered him to buy enough supplies to refill the ship entirely. They didn't know how long it would take them to get to the next island after all.

"Speaking of which," Luffy said as he finished speaking to Nami, relaying her question to Henzo. "How long does it take the Log Pose to set here?"

"Two days," Henzo said promptly. "We're not often locked on from Alabasta, but Ruluka acts as if it was a stopover point along the normal route."

"So stopping here isn't going to set us on an entirely different route or force us to go back to Alabasta and try again?" Luffy asked.

"No. You can only find this Island if you're on one of the two routes that pass through Alabasta. It has no connection to the other one whatsoever and indeed even on that route LogPoses only rarely lock onto Ruluka at all."

Luffy nodded then a thought occurred to him. "Actually Sanji, I've got one more request. See if you can find three or four cameras. We might need them if we actually succeed in entering the Rainbow Mist as we're hoping to."

While Sanji simply answered in the affirmative Robin smiled appreciatively at that, leaning in to whisper, "You truly are much more intelligent than you sometimes let on Luffy."

"Is that a problem?" Luffy asked, honestly curious.

"No, that simply make you more fascinating as an individual," *and as a mystery*. Robin added silently.

That caused Luffy to blush slightly. "Yes, well, it takes one to know one Robin," he said before turning away, gesturing Henzo to start walking once more. He did so, while Robin and Luffy followed.

About 30 minutes later, the three of them entered Henzo's lab which was built around a heavy staircase made of steel heading further upwards to what looked like a telescope of some kind. It was one of the most advanced things that Luffy had seen in this world, reminding him of some of the telescopes back in his old life. Robin also looked interested as they entered, and from the way she had fallen silent, Luffy knew she had summoned up a few eyeballs up above them to look at the telescope.

"What was this was calculation you were talking about?" Luffy asked.

"It's a calculation I've tried to create to figure out when and where the Rainbow Mist will arrive. That's why I needed these books you see," he said, taking them gratefully from

Robin, and flipping them through them one after another. At intervals he found several pages and jotted down notes so fast that his hand almost blurred. "I think I've figured out where precisely in the oceans around the island it would appear, but how long it takes to appear has eluded me. With these, I can find that out!"

"That sounds good and all," Luffy said leaning against the wall, "but what's to stop us from getting trapped on the other side? I like the idea of exploring this Ape's concert, but not at the expense of getting trapped there."

Henzo remained silent for a moment, working on the calculations. Then he paused, staring at the result. "That, that can't be right, such a coincidence beggars belief..." he muttered under his breath.

This forced Luffy to repeat himself, which he did, causing Henzo to wince, looking away from the books and the pirates both. "...That is one thing that the mayor and I have been working on. The copy of the last Rainbow Mist book in the series we have here stated that the connection between Ape's concert and this world could be kept open for a time if something material from this world lay across the event horizon of the mist. So I designed a sort of tower that could be stretched out into the Mist."

Luffy exchanged a glance with Robin, and then Makino, who had joined them outside. She had wanted to talk to Luffy about some supplies the locals seemed to have in abundance which had said he needed for work on the showers. "And how much has that actually cost?" As the ship's bursar and a former bar owner Makino knew what building even a single house cost, let alone something like what Henzo was describing.

"Everything," Henzo muttered. "The mayor has sucked this town dry to pay for it, sucked every ship that's come here dry, spent practically on it and on a few other things."

"A few other things you helped him with?" Makino interjected, having watching Henzo closely as he spoke and seen the guilt there. "Those next suits you mentioned perhaps?"

Henzo sighed and nodded. "it was the price I had to pay," he said simply, looking down at the books laid out on his work desk.

"And why, exactly, were you willing to pay it in the first place?" Robin asked. "You're not doing this just for science's sake."

"The mayor is interested in the riches that could be found in Ape's concert." Henzo looked up at the pirate fiercely. "I just want to find my friends!"

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Zoro alighted down on the ship, then lay out on the ship side of the gangplank, his swords on the deck beside him as he closed his eyes. *Might as well take a nap while I'm waiting for trouble.* He was not woken up by the noises of the new arrivals forty minutes later, though anyone else would have been given the clamor they were making.

"Put the barrels over there, the wharf is thin so if it's behind me, I don't have to worry about it, and that pirate will have to get through me to get to it," ordered a sharp voice.

The speaker was younger than the man that Zoro had knocked out earlier, but had the same general appearance, same dark orange hair, same sideburns and a similar looking face. He was obviously a family member possibly even the first man's son.

Currently he was wearing what could only be described as a mech-suit. It had stumpy metal legs leading up to a metal plate over his chest, with servos connecting it to robotic hands. Each hand ended in weapons of some kind. One of them was a nozzle, the other a forked device of some kind.

Behind the man stood two other men on either side of a seesaw contraption which was in turn connected to a pair of heavy looking bellows. As they began to work it, the suit seemed to come alive, the man within now stepping forward now much more easily than he had been a moment before. The weapons too came online, the fork beginning to spark electrical energies between its two tines, while on the other a small pilot light came on in the barrel.

"Right! You men," he said gesturing to several other men who were standing behind his helpers, "Get ready. Once I deal with that swordsman, we'll loot the ship to the ground then burn it where it floats."

Zoro it had still not woken up, and the man scoffed a little. "Dammit, and I wanted to see his face when he saw the mech-suit for the first time. Oh well." With a faint sigh of dissatisfaction, the man raised his flame thrower, and pointed it at Zoro. An instant later it roared to life, flinging a fireball towards where Zoro was sleeping in front of the gangplank.

Between one second in the next Zoro's eyes popped open, and he rolled sideways down the gangplank, one of his swords flashing out. *Ittoryu I-ai, Flashing Phoenix!*" A second later the fireball dissipated into two different pieces in front of him, the flames snuffed out by his attack, a super condensed air pressure attack which exploded upon impact.

Standing upright, Zoro sheathed Wado, and pulled out his other two swords feeling the bloodlust of Sandai Kitetsu, and the calm almost detached feeling of Yubashiri. They balanced one another out very well, which was why he routinely used both of them when two swords were called for, and the more harmonious deeper and more powerful spirit of Wado Ichimonji when a single blade was called for.

"And who are you supposed to be?" drawled the first mate of the Straw Hat pirate crew.

"I'm Lake! Your crew attacked our tax enforcers and my father Philip! For that your lives are forfeit and your ship too!" Lake shouted. "Surrender, pay the tolls and my grandfather might be lenient."

"How about no?" Zoro said, pulling out his bandanna and tying it around his hair for a moment then placing Wado in his mouth crouching down. "I've been getting antsy lately, nine whole days without a good fight outside of sparring. I hope you can at least entertain me a little."

Richard didn't respond verbally, simply pointing his electrical arc at the swordsman and charging forward. "Electric spark!"

Zoro lashed out wincing as his sword connected with the electrical prod, the metal of his Sandai conveying the electrical current to him easily. However he twisted the blow to the die, twisting inside the Lake's reach, flashing Yubashiri towards his chest.

Hopping backwards Richard avoided it, trying to bring up his flamethrower. But the moment the flamethrower created a fireball it was cut in two by another pass from Wado, Zoro's head moving to the side violently enough to send a thin air attack at the ball of fire, impacting and imploding it in midair.

Behind Lake his men opened fire, causing Zoro to still himself for a moment "Tekkai." Like this the musket balls hit, but did no damage. However his moment of stillness allowed Richard to regain his balance and thrust forward with the electrical prod.

It slammed into Zoro's chest, and there was the smell of singeing skin for a moment, thousands of volts electrocuting Zoro. But he twisted backwards, deactivating the Tekkai which had done its purpose protecting him even from that to a certain degree. He'd feel it in the morning, and his body was already starting to spasm from aftershocks but he was still in full control.

"Flying Hawk!" He shouted, lashing out with a low powered air attack towards the men with the muskets as they were trying to reload. The attack slammed into the column, sending them all scattering in every direction. At the same time Zoro twisted away from another attack from the electrical prod, hopping up and landing on top of the flamethrower arm. One sword stabbed down, slamming through the flamethrower and down onto the wharf, pinning it there as his other sword came around in a simple slash.

Richard saw his life flashing before his eyes as that blade came for him, and he quickly pulled himself out of the suit and rolling backwards. The suit's faceplate was sliced clear through, removing the head cavity from it entirely, and Zoro then pulled the sword he had used on the flamethrower out, hopping up and over the ruined suit to land in front of Richard, holding out Yubashiri to the younger man's throat. "You still want to go?" Zoro asked.

He was interrupted however as shouts of shock arose from a few of the soldiers and several other passerby. But their shock had nothing to do with Zoro's victory. They had been shocked of it by of course, but at the moment a greater surprise had overtaken them. Because out in the middle of the cove, had appeared a pink and purple mist where nothing had been a moment ago. As Zoro turned and stared, the mist slowly spread, not even noticing Lake skidding backwards on his read before he turned and raced off.

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"...I cannot believe it! My predictions, it's true. I don't know if this is luck or divine providence," Henzo whispered, staring at the mist with hungry eyes. Which was something the pirates could understand, having just heard about what had happened to Henzo's friends when they were all younger.

Robin and Makino both turned to Luffy staring at him intently, the older woman shaking her head as they both remembered how they had found Drum Island in time to save Vivi. "You have either the strangest kind of luck, or..."

"Or I'm Fate's Bitch, and she likes to throw good things and bad things my way equally," Luffy said equably. "Where is this tower of yours?" he asked, turning back to Henzo.

"Behind the mayor's palace, they should already be starting the process of enlarging it extruding it..."

The group turend away from looking at the mist to stare up towards the mayors house, where they could indeed see something large tower made of concrete beginning to shoot up into the sky further from the rest the mansion.

"I wondered about that," Makino said with a nod, sharing a glance with Robin. "It certainly didn't match the rest of the house's architecture."

Henzo however ignored them racing away down the hill as a massive ship appeared out of the mist, floating away on the tides.

"Where's he going?" Luffy asked.

"He seems to be making for our ship." Robbin supplied helpfully, watching as Henzo hurled himself off the edge of the hill, his hang glider coming out of his pack a second later.

Groaning, Sanji pulled out the Den-Den Mushi. "Sanji, where are you?"

"Just finished the shopping captain," Sanji replied. "We made a few stopovers because Nami-swan wanted to see what they had in terms of local fashion, but we're heading back to the ship now."

"Good, we'll meet you there." Luffy turned to Robin and Makino, pulling Robin into his arms before turning to let Makino onto his back. Going by experience he hoped carrying them this way would be less distracting than if Robin was on his back. It sort of failed as Robin pressed her chest against his, as she held on, but Luffy was able to ignore it for the time it took them to pass Henzo in midair and land on the deck of the Resolve.

Luffy and the others found Zoro standing over the remains of another of the local patrols just as a man rabbitied away down the wharf. He looked so much like the first officer they'd dealt with that Luffy shook his head. "What, do they clone themselves now?"

"Some traits seem to be more hereditary than others," Henzo replied, ignoring the running man as he landed next to the three pirates. He quickly began to pull up the anchor, ignoring the others as they followed him.

"This is my ship Henzo!" Luffy said firmly, laying a hand on his shoulder and holding him still. "we don't move unless I order it."

Henzo grimaced, but nodded. He had honestly hoped to simply steal the ship, but the others had hurried after him so quickly he hadn't had the opportunity. And he had completely left Zoro out of his equations.

Luffy nodded too turning away. "Robin, Makino, keep him from moving the ship if he tries, we're waiting for the others before we move on. Zoro, help me with that suit. I want it stored in our hold."

"Why?" Zoro asked. "It looks cool I'll grant you, but it's not that good. And while you might be a decent wood worker but you've never said you'd able to do anything like this."

"Wouldn't even know where to start," Luffy said cheerfully. "Doesn't mean it can't be useful somewhere down the line though. Maybe we can find someone to add to the crew to be our armorer or something."

"What about them?" Zoro asked, gesturing to his former opponents, who wre now scrambling away down the wharf after their leader. "Won't they tell this mayor that we've taken care of another group of his bully boys?"

"And?" Luffy asked blankly. "Why should that matter at all?"

Zoro laughed, while Makino rolled her eyes. Robin however Had her mind on something more serious. "Are you certain that once that tower collapses into the Rainbow Mist it will allow us to escape after we enter it?"

"My calculations on that are not nearly as specific as my calculations on place and now time," Henzo said prevaricating until Robin's eyes narrowed. "...It should work, but I don't know. No one ever attempted to connect Ape's Concert to the real world deliberately before."

With Luffy carrying the suit, and Zoro carrying the power apparatus, they were able to get it onboard and stowed by the time Sanji and the others arrived. All the while they heard the sound of clanking from up near the mayor's mansion as the tower continued to extrude itself from its underground bunker.

"Why are we in such a hurry?" Nami grumbled, irritated they'd had to leave the shops behind since a lot of the clothing here were of very good quality. "Could we just wait for the mayor and his people to do the work for us? They're after all the riches of this Ape's Concert place I mean. It would be easier to steal from them than to go searching for it on our own."

"Nami, we're not interested in riches anymore," Luffy said. "We're interested in knowledge on this trip. Besides, we've got a whole lot of treasure already. You can search for choice items I suppose once we get in there, but only with Sanji with you just in case."

"I'm always interested in riches!" Nami growled back but nodded as Luffy said she could still search out some choice bits for herself. *After all if I do that what I find will eblong to me, rather than the crew. That will be a big help on my next shopping trip.*

Moments later the schooner pulled up alongside the large galleon, which showed some signs of combat. Henzo said the ship had been Whetton's original pirate ship years ago when he first arrived on the island, which was so long ago only Henzo, Whetton and his son were still alive from that time. But to the doctor's despair, there was no sign of his friends. That meant they had to enter the Rainbow Mist in earnest.

Entering the mists was kind of creepy in Luffy's opinion. One moment the sky was bright blue over them, then the next they were heading into a fog bank so thick they couldn't see a foot ahead of their faces, let alone where the ship was going. On Luffy's orders they slowed down despite Henzo's protests and Luffy stood on the prow, taking soundings as they went. This slowed them down considerably, but eventually they were through the mist and into... someplace else.

There was no stars here, no sun no clouds. No sky at all, simply endless black above them. on the edge of their line of sight there was blackness, a blackness of shadow and smog. And right ahead of them was a massive car crash of mangled ships. Ancient barques brigs and galleons, sailing ships of all types, ages and sizes including many that looked futuristic to the Straw Hat's eyes. They were all mangled together, brought here somehow by the Rainbow Mist and clumped together by the odd tides of this place.

This looks like what I'd imagine the inside of my ki space would be Luffy thought frowning. "I wonder what sustains it then..." he muttered to himself as he tried to follow that analogy.

Nami looked at him quizzically, and Luffy shook his head. Just an errant thought."

"You have any other kind?" Nami asked, smacking him with her hip as she walked away.

Luffy rolled his eyes, but turned to Makino at the wheel. "Keep us on this course for another minute, then slowly turn us around, we'll anchor just clear of those wrecks."

The racks in question spread as far as they could see here, which wasn't nearly as far as they would have been able to see normally. There were about uncounted hulks smashed together here there, creating an awful artificial island almost, though there were patches of ocean here and there close enough for this schooner to get and anchor without actually hitting anything else.

The moment they came to a stop however, Henzo and everyone else's attention was grabbed by something else. "**Leave this place!**" shouted a sepulchral voice. "**Leave this place or die!**"

Luffy strode forward crossing his arms. "I'd like to see you say that to her face whoever you are! I don't take orders from disembodied voices. I'm not **that** crazy."

His crew laughed, then gasped as a crossbow bolt came out of nowhere from the wreckage to one side. Nami, who it had been aimed at, swiftly dodged to one side her hand coming up and smacking it away easily. Several more followed in quick succession, but the crew dodge, or in Luffy and Zoro's cases caught them easily. "Is that it?" Luffy asked lazily.

"Go from this place!" Said the voice again, though it's listeners could now detected a slight sign of worry there, shown even more clearly as he went on. "Go away, or you'll run into more than you can handle!"

Shaking his head Luffy turned to Robin. "Robin?"

Robin had already crossed her arms, conjuring up hundreds of eyes in every direction, then smiling she did the same with her hands. There was a series of squawks and shouts of horror, which oddly sounded as if they were coming from very throats to Luffy and his crew. Then a moment later, Robin's conjured hands pulled several young people who had been hiding in the nearest wreck into view.

There were six of them, five boys and one girl, all of whom looked like normal kids for the most part. The girl had long light purple hair, but that and her lack of adam's apple were the only things that made her stand out from the rest until Luffy and Sanji had gone to retrieve

them, dumping them all onto the deck of the ship still 'tied up' by Robin's conjured hands, which quickly disappeared as they landed.

Staring at the six children Henzo's eyes began to glitter with unshed tears, one hand rising to his mouth.

"You, you damn pirates!" A somewhat taller, more rangy boy shouted, get to his feet and pulling out a wicked looking dagger from under his shirt, standing between his friends and the pirates.

Now that they were close enough, that kid looked oddly familiar to Luffy Zoro and Sanji, and they exchanged a glance. "Hey kid," Luffy said, pointing. Do you have father or grandfather in the Marines?"

The kid actually paused at that question, staring up at them. "I've never even known my grandfather! I had a father in the Marines though." At that he seemed to shake himself brandishing the knife racing towards them. "You'll never take us alive!"

Henzo however stepped forward, staring at the boy then at the others, tears now flowing down his face. "How, how is this possible! Rapanui, Isoka, Rongo, Akibi, Pukau, how, how are you..."

"How o you know our names," the girl asked, looking first at the old man then the pirates, relaxing noticeably as she looked at Makino and the other two women, who smiled back at her and the kids. The other four boys also relaxed at the sight too, and one of them even reached out to grab the charging boy's shoulder.

He in turn glared at Henzo as the old doctor replied. "I, look, look at me Rapanui, it's me, Henzo!"

The so-named Rapanui stared up at Henzo then backed away rapidly as the youngest boy there shook his head. "No way, Henzo was our age! He's just got the same name."

"R, right, this is a trick of these dirty pirates, there's no way!" Rapanui bellowed, wrenching himself free.

Makino stepped around Henzo quickly and reached down like a viper quick, grabbing Rapanui's arm in one hand before plucking the knife out with her other hand. "Young boys shouldn't go around threatening people with such things unless they know how to use them," she said kindly, tossing the dagger over the side. "Now, can we all sit down and discuss this like rational people, or do you a spanking first?"

"And I resent the dirty pirate label!" Luffy said smirking. "We're all quite clean you know."

Chopper nodded. "Being clean is important for preventing diseases."

"EEHH! The tanuki talked!" more than one of the kids shouted.

"I'm not a tanuki! Can't you see my horns!" Chopper roared, pointing at his horns.

"That's even weirder!" shouted the same boy, but he was quickly silenced by Isoak putting a hand over his mouth.

"Yeesh, read the atmosphere you shits," Sanji muttered, nodding kindly at the girl who smiled back hesitantly. They all watched as Henzo moved around Makino, going down to one knee in front of the kids still sobbing.

"Time passes differently in Ape's concert," Robin said sighing as the moment of levity disappeared in an instant. "I suppose we should have expected this."

Eventually the kids and Henzo calmed down enough to actually talk about what they had experienced since that night long ago. At the same time and in order to help them all calm down further Sanji brought out some food for them, which the kids all devoured greedily.

Once their reunion was over, Luffy got down to business. "So, what can you tell me about this place?"

Though still suspicious Rapanui answered readily enough. "Well for one thing, there is no one else alive in here but us. That's been the case since we arrived."

"Except for the prisoner," one of the other boys, an equally rangy kid named Rongo interjected. "He's a former Whetton pirate we captured when we stole Whetton's ship. We keep him in the hold of the ship we moved to after we put out the fire on Whetton's."

"How long it to you has it been since you entered here? From your perspective I mean?" Robin asked.

"Who can say?" Rapanui snorted. "We have no way of telling time. There's no clocks here, none that work anyway, no sun, no stars. I think we've only been here for a month at most. We've set up a lot of traps, but we were still trying to set up heavier ones when you arrived."

"So a month in here and how many years outside? 80?" Luffy asked looking over at Henzo. "You better be right about that door staying open once that tower of yours collapses into Rainbow Mist. If we become Rip van Winkle, I'm going to hurt you."

Robin's eyebrows twitched again and she put another tally against the number of mysteries surrounding Luffy. That was a name of a book she had read in the Tree of Knowledge

and had never seen it since. But at present, her main interest lay in the ships around them. "Have you done any exploring beyond setting up those traps of yours?"

"Some," said Isoka, who had gravitated towards the trio of women and was actually sitting in front of Makino now, letting the older woman start to comb her hair while Nami sat nearby. It was evident that despite being a bit of a tomboy she had somewhat missed the company of other girls. "For one thing, no matter which direction you go, you'll always come back here. It's about 15 miles across or so, all of it junk like this. There's also a Sea king around,

"We saw it," the crew replied drolly, staring over at Zoro.

He smirked, touching one of his swords, which he had used to cut the Sea king the instant it had reared up out of the mists. The thing had died so quickly it barely registered to them as they said one.. "What, the fight with that Lake guy was boring, I had to do something to get some exercise."

"Hmmm, I can see wrecks from dozens of different eras here," Robin mused. "And I don't think you've been looking for books or anything like that have you?" She didn't want to saw things like weapons aloud. Rapanui at least was still very leery of them and there was no need to foster further wariness.

"No, why would we?" Rapanui replied blankly. "We found a lot of treasure of course, but again what would we need it for here?"

"Treasure!" Nami said, suddenly getting in the boy's face, her eyes having become belis signs, twinkling so brightly the kids backed away, holding their hands up in front of thier eyes to shield them from the light.

Shaking his head Luffy looked over at Sanji. "Did you pick up those cameras I asked about?"

Sanji nodded, and went to fetch one of the sacks that he, Chopper and Nami had come back to the ship with. He handed large, ungainly cameras, the only ones available on Ruluka, out to the others. They were the best they could do, and even if they only took a few pictures of some of the more advanced ships it might well be worth the effort.

Luffy did the same with some Den-Den Mushis. "Zoro, since you're so eager to have a fight, you and Makino stay on the ship with the kids and Henzo. Sanji, Nami, you can go searching for treasure if you like. Robin? Chopper?"

The two of them looked at one another, then Robin replied. "I believe we could handle ourselve once we are over on the wrecks."

"What exactly are we going to be looking for besides books and medical equipment?" Chopper asked, holding the camera in his small hooves. He would change into his Heavy Point once someone else had brought him over to the wrecks.

"Anything that looks high-tech," Luffy said hesitantly, looking quickly at the kids then away going on more strongly. "Take a lot of pictures of anything you find that looks unusual at the very least. Any maps, journals, or anything with writing on it, along with books and medical equipment for Chopper. Call me over once you have too much to carry, and I'll stuff it into my ki space."

"We'll make an archaeologist of you yet," Robin said approvingly, deliberately using the same words that Luffy had used to Zoro earlier that day only changing the subject.

Luffy mock growled at her, and she laughed a bright clear sound before turning away moving towards the ship's railing, hopping up onto it. A second later, she conjured up a rope of sorts made of arms coming out from the nearest ship to take her own and pulling her across the divide.

"Robin-san that was so cool!" Chopper exclaimed.

"Bah she didn't do the yodel, zero points." Zoro muttered

Sanji kicked him hard in the side. "How dare you give Robin-chan zero's points! That was at least a nine and a half!"

"You're obviously biased ero-cook!" Zoro growled, getting to his feet quickly. "And do you want to go!?"

"Enough!" Luffy said he moved over to Nami and hefted her into his arms. "What ship do you want to target first?"

Nami pointed to a large brig in the distance and Luffy nodded, hopping up into the air to the shock of the kids. Their shock grew as Sanji quickly followed. "Oy shitty captain that's supposed to be my job!"

"Snooze you loose Sanji!" Luffy replied with a laugh, before setting Nami down. He nodded to her, then hopped back into the air and began to move around the area, taking pictures of anything that looked interesting time.

What followed was several of what felt like hours of searching from one end of the Rainbow Mister to the other, not for treasure or anything specific, but just general searching. Chopper searched each wreck in turn, coming away with only a few medical books, but quite a bit of equipment he was practically gushing over. He had to call Luffy over to him several times,

and once Zoro moved to help him lug up something Chopper called an artificial heart pump out of the ship he had found it in.

Luffy for his part spent most of his time exploring a ship that looked like the Nautilus. He hadn't really much liked the plot of the book it had appeared in when he had been forced to read it in English class at Furinkan but when he saw the movie, the ship itself had looked damn awesome.

Looking around Luffy got a lot of ideas for their own future permanent ship, along with some changes he could make to the Resolve possibly in the future, though that was doubtful. *Making it able to go into the water is beyond my skills, but it would still be cool to try.*

During her own searches Robin found dozens of books, over half of them written in languages she had never run into before. "Truly fascinating!" She said, coming back to the ship and dropping her gains down on the ground, smiling at the kids and Henzo. Sanji had left food behind them all, and the kids seemed willing enough to simply wait there and talk to Henzo, eating real cooked food for the first time in weeks. *It must be a surreal experience for Henzo-san, after all it's been so long for him, and only a few short weeks to them.*

Nami and Sanji explored together, finding a lot of jewelry even though Nami slowly became irritated at Sanji's over the top flirting. They didn't take any money, since most of the money they found wasn't actually in currency they recognized. And they didn't take any gold either, being too heavy. But the jewels and worked trinkets were a different story. Eventually however the two of them made their way to the temporary headquarters of the former Pumpkinhead Pirates turned junior Marines according to Rapanui, where they discover the prisoner the kids had talked about.

"Who the heck are you!? What's going on out there?" The man's shouted as soon as he saw two adults rather than the kids. Then he paused, staring at Nami. "Mmm, damn girl! How about you let me out of here, I'll show you a real good time."

Sanji glared at the man. "That is no way to address a lady!" He kicked out, his foot smashing into the jail cell's door and rocketing it off it's hinges and back into the man, carrying him into the wall behind him and knocking him unconscious. He then turned bowing grandly towards Nami. "I have defended your honor Nami-Chawn, aren't you happy!"

"Thank you Sanji-kun," Nami replied dryly. "Now pick him up and let's go. I don't think we want to leave even him behind in the Mist when we leave."

Just then there was a violent crash in the distance and the two of them quickly turned around, Nami grabbing up one of the bags of jewels while Sanji grabbed the prisoner and hefted them onto his shoulder. While grabbing up two more jewelry bags they had been gathering. "Sanji if you drop those bags I will drop you!" Nami shouted racing out of the hold.

"Of course Nami-swan!" Sanji bellowed, following her out of the ship.

Moments before the two treasure hunters heard the crash Robin had joined Luffy on the Nautilus-like ship, searching for books and specifically journals of any sort. "Does anything stand out to you Luffy?" she asked, not looking up from the large library she was perusing as Luffy came in behind her. The room must have been the captain's quarters given its size, but her search for a journal had come up empty.

"I've taken a lot of pictures, don't think I can make heads or tails how the ship actually moved without sails or rigging though," Luffy said ruefully, lying somewhat. It looked something like a coal burner, which he had seen in a book about early trains at one point but that was about all Luffy could tell. For all his skill in martial arts construction Ranma had never been an engineer, and had never picked up the art in this lifetime either.

"Is there still room in your ki space?" Robin asked. "Some of these books are utterly fascinating, though at least half are on engineering matters that go well over my head."

"Sure, I just came back from a run back to the ship," he said moving over to join her. Neither noticed how close they stood at first their sides brushing against one another. "What books are you thinking of taking here?"

"All of them?" Robin asked, turning to her companion and only now noticing how close they stood. She didn't back away however, instead reaching forward to gently touch Luffy's chest with her hand, feeling the muscles under his shirt. Luffy looked down at her hand, but made no move to move backward or remove Robin's hand from his chest. "All of this is just fascinating to me, and I want to take all of them if I can, particularly from this ship."

Their conversation was interrupted by a crashing noise in the distance. Luffy turned quickly. "Come on! I think that's probably the tower thing arriving."

The noise was indeed Whetton's tower arriving. It was a large edifice, large enough to eat a sloop, laying now across the water, being held there by thick pontoons, almost as wide as the tower itself. Seeing it arrive, Makino could only shake her head in amazement, thinking of all the work that had gone into its construction. Then she remembered that building it had been the chief task for the entire island for over eighty years now. That put the work of building the thing in perspective, though the design of it was still worthy of admiration and she looked over at Henzo with respect.

As she and Zoro stood with the kids on the aft end of the ship, the tower stopped growing into Ape's concert, the loud clanging and banging the others had heard ceasing as the final protrusion pushed out from its fellows. Then the end of the tower, now acting like a covered bridge or tunnel, opened up. Inside was a ramp and some kind of belt system to one side. Several small craft were lined up there and raced out as a ramp fell into the water. It

looked like some kind of fan was driving them forward, with two men working pedals at the front and to other men standing behind them armed with rifles.

The men with rifles quickly took the people around the Resolve under fire, and Makino hurled herself sideways to take the kids down, covering them with her own body. Rapanui wound up with his face pressed into Makino's chest, and blushed hotly, trying to squirm away, but Makino kept herself on top of him and two of the others, while Henzo did the same for the other three.

Zoro on the other hand hadn't moved, activating his Tekkai and simply taking the bullets that hit him. As the fusillade ended He canceled the technique and moved, hopping from the aft deck of the Resolve onto the nearest small boat, his swords lashing out to either side. The two boats he targeted were cut in two, while the one he landed on rocked but remained relatively still.

He was then forced to dodge back however as a blast of fire roared through his previous position. The men on the raft he had been standing on dove into the sea in a desperate attempt to escape the fireball. But one of them couldn't move fast enough and screamed as he and the craft were immolated.

Landing back on the Resolve's guardrail Zoro looked in that direction, a vicious scowl on his face. There in the entrance to the concrete tunnel stood three mech suits like the one Zoro had dealt with in town. The man he'd tangled with was in one of them, one which looked almost unfinished having no weapons but large metal hands and he looked rather horrified at the moment, staring at the middle-most suit.

That suit was somewhat larger than the one Lake had worn in their earlier battle. It had heavier, more built up legs with iron struts visible along the sides of the rubber suit to provide strength, and had a third, completely metallic leg sticking stick out the back. The arms in turn looked somewhat lighter, or at least thinner, and both of them ended in the flamethrower apertures that Lake had on one of his hands in their earlier fight.

Inside that suit was an old man, older by far than even Philip but with the same general look. *That asshole must be the pirate turned mayor Whetton. And he just killed one of his own men.*

On the other side of Whetton from Lake stood Philip in another suit, which like Lake's looked almost unfinished, having no plastic plate to cover it's face. It had twin electric prods rather than a mix of flamethrower and prod. And Philip, unlike his son, didn't look horrified at his own father's act, instead pointing at Zoro angrily. "That's one of the people who attacked me Father! The others might be around here too!"

"Bah, who cares about that, they're in our way now, and whoever is getting in our way needs to be taken care of!" Whetton shouted. "You lot, keep searching for his accomplices, I'm going to burn that ship to ash!"

Lake might have made an objection, but it went unheard as Whetton's troops responded with a roar and he fired another fireball at the Resolve. Over the roar of the fireball, Zoro couldn't hear anything but the roar of the fire and one of the kids shouting incredulously, "That's Whetton?! But he's so old!" Evidently the fact people had aged so much hadn't sunk in despite Henzo's presence.

Before Zoro could do anything about the fireball his captain and the others came out of the wrecks they had been exploring and joined the fight. Leaping into the air Luffy intercepted the fireball with several Rankyaku, causing it to explode in midair. Then he turned his attention on the small ships scuttling around the Resolve and deeper into Ape's concert. "The leaders're still yours Zoro if ya still want them! I'll take care of the riffraff!"

Before he could however, Sanji was there, lashing out with his own Rankyaku. Several others fell to Makino's accurate fire from where she was now kneeling behind the guardrail, and Robin's conjured 'clutch' attack. Luffy huffed, pushing up on his straw hat as he turned a pout on Robin. "Spoil all my fun why don't you."

"As if this group would be any challenge," Robin teased.

She then nearly squawked as Luffy deliberately bumped her with his hip, nearly knocking her off their perch on the drill-like structure at the prow of the advanced ship they had been exploring. She turned a glare at him, But Luffy was already away leaping into the air with a cackle as he continued the attack on the troopers.

Back in the main battle Zoro had launched himself through the air towards the three mech suits, closing the distance before Whetton's suit could launch another fireball. "Tatsu Maki!" He shouted, creating his own mini tornado attack hurling all three suits around. The attack sliced deeply into the unfinished pair of mech suits, though Whetton's suit blunted the attack, only stumbling back. Lake's suit toppled to the side the chest piece carved open in several places and the stabilizing legs also cut though he had dodged just far back enough to avoid being cut in turn. Philip's had fared worse, his suit being sliced in several places and one of his arms bleeding from a cut that had nearly removed it from the shoulder.

Whetton tried to bring his weapons down to fire pointblank at Zoro but Zoro dodged inside his reach, trying to get behind the unit before it could do anything. However Whetton turned the unit around, blocking the blow with one of his flamethrower arms and aiming the other one not at Zoro, but at something beyond Zoro's shoulder, which turned out to be the flamethrower's fuel tanks, which were situated along one side of the tunnel. Whetton had obviously intended to cause an explosion which would take Zoro out from behind.

The explosion rocked Zoro forward, but he rolled with it even as the explosion started to spread up the moving belt thing that was set to one side of the tunnel. Even as he rolled on the ground of the tunnel Zoro heard more explosions in the distance.

This time Whetton couldn't turn fast enough to protect himself from Zoro's attack. Yubashiri flashed backward, smashing into the unprotected back of Whetton's head, and he slumped forward, kept upright only by his suit.

Turning, Zoro cocked an eyebrow at Lake, who had pulled himself out from under his suit. Zoro noted his mech suit had taken further damage from the explosion, but Lake appeared fine, if rather soot covered. "You still want to fight?"

Lake shook his head quickly, moving over to Philip and trying to bandage his father's wounds as best he could, not saying a word.

Staring at this through the bars of the guardrail Rapanui could only shake his head. "That... that was Whetton? The, the man who conquered our island, who terrorized the oceans around Ruluka for so long? And that swordsman, he took him and those suit things out making it look almost easy!"

"Even legends grow old, and while Whetton might have been dangerous, he certainly was no legend." Makino said from nearby, standing up straight now.

By this point she Robin, Sanji and Luffy had dealt with the scattered groups of the mayor's enforcers. From where she stood she could see Robin conjuring hands to tie the troopers up, while Luffy began to pile them in the entrance to the concrete tunnel. Sanji on the other hand had picked up Nami and was making their way toward the Resolve. Even from here she could tell his eyes had changed into hearts, and she wondered once more how he did that.

"Well that was anticlimactic," Luffy said, landing beside Zoro one more time dropping off Chopper who hurried over to Philip. Of their enemies he was the one who had taken the most severe wounds.

Before Zoro could reply there was a sudden shudder in the air all around them, the Mist enclosing Ape's concert suddenly beginning to lighten, as if it was dissipating. He stared at his captain and then both of them turned away from the prisoners, grabbing Chopper and leaping into the air, hopping there via Geppo for a moment.

"I think we've overstayed our welcome!" Luffy shouted at the top of his lungs while Zoro hopped back toward the Resolve with Chopper in his arms. "Everybody back to the ship! It's time we left."

Henzo shook his head violently from where he had been standing by the wheel with Rapanui and the others. "No! That can't be, the tower should have, wait, yes! That's it! The

explosions, that is somehow impact the physical nature of the Mist, and without that, the dimensional gate is starting to collapse too. But why would a purely material reaction effect it like that?"

"Who knows? Who cares?" Luffy asked rhetorically as he alighted down on the guardrail beside them. "I don't want to spend 80 plus years stuck here, so we are moving people!"

From there Luffy, Sanji, Chopper and Zoro quickly began to use long poles to row the ship forward and back out of the Mist, happy they had turned the ship around after anchoring. It was slow going since there was no wind to help them, but the four of them were strong enough to make progress.

As they passed by the entrance to the tunnel, they saw that Lake had taken charge there. With Robin having canceled the arms which had been holding them, the prisoners were free to make their own escape.. Under his orders Whetton, Philip and the other injured were being carried along with them to the small boats, which was now their only escape. The fire had spread back into the tunnel blocking off any passage that way.

From her position by the prow, Robin saw that the concrete tunnel seemed to be shaking. Portions of it looked odd to her eyes, almost as if bits and pieces of it were slowly becoming unreal somehow, which was very odd. As she stared at them, they seemed to blink out of existence, leaving holes in the structure.

"Whatever is going on we need to hurry on quickly I think," Robin said loudly but still calmly. "Ape's concert is going away, and anything on the edge between it is going to be torn into itty bitty pieces. This no doubt includes us, and I imagine the feeling would be like being torn apart from within by thousands of little blades."

"Gah such a horrible imagination Robin!" Nami shouted, lugging out several more long poles. She and the others immediately split up, going to either side of the schooner and joining the four boys in rowing the ship along.

Portions of the aft of the ship began to disappear, but the ship kept going for a time, the crew being too busy rowing to talk, while the mist around them continued to lighten. Then Henzo screamed. "Rapanui, Isoka, everyone, what's happening to you?!"

Luffy and the others turned as much as they could to see what was going on. The six boys were slowly becoming incorporeal as the Straw Hat crew watched, their solid bodies beginning to disappear. It looked almost like they were turning into ghosts, the effect becoming worse as the Resolve continued to move through the mist.

"A time paradox," Robin muttered. "I have read about such things in fantasy novels, but I never thought the effect would be like this..."

"Explain that!" Luffy ordered, looking over at her from where he continued to row.

"A time paradox is when something is occurring which creates well, a paradox," Robin said somewhat lamely. "If you go back in time for example, and something happens to cause you to not exist in the present, the theory goes that you will disappear from the future. It's extremely confusing, but that is the only thing I can think of that would explain what we are seeing."

"So, so if we continue with you we'll disappear?" Isoka said, sounding scared. The youngest boy had actually begun to cry, while the others were in shock.

"I'm afraid so. I am no expert, but that is the only guess I can make at this time." Robin replied, looking at Henzo, who was simply staring at the children in shocked horror. "Henzo-san?"

That question seemed to shock the old man out of his stupor and he nodded slowly.

At this Rapanui acted quickly. He grabbed his nearest friend and pushed him towards the back of the ship. "Let's go! Out over the back of the ship. If leaving is causing this, then if we stay in Ape's Concert we can save ourselves!"

"Wait, no! I haven't done all this, worked with Whetton and his family for so long, perjured myself and my work, just to let you disappear like that!" Henzo bellowed, trying to stop them but the other kids quickly followed their leader, racing to the back of the ship faster than Henzo could keep up with.

None of the Straw Hats interfered not even Nami, Chopper and Makino, simply watching on. All of them knew that Rapanui had made the right choice.

Rapanui waited until the others had jumped overboard, swimming strongly towards one of the pontoon rafts which had broken off from Whetton's tunnel. He smiled wanly at Henzo saluting him Marine style. "Don't worry Henzo, we'll see each other again my friend, I promise!" With that he turned, leaping into the ocean after his friends.

"No! Take me with you at least!" Henzo said, clambering up onto the guardrail. However Nami reached him before he could jump off, pulling the older man back and holding him easily as the Resolve continued on it's way.

Soon enough the ship brok through the mist, and a bare instant later the Rainbow Mist flickered and disappeared. It didn't dissipate like mist normally would but like it had somehow teleported away. One moment it was there, the next it was just gone, leaving Henzo sobbing on the aft deck of the Straw Hat's ship.

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While Henzo was broken up about how things had turned out, the rest of the island's inhabitants were gleeful. The tower was destroyed, and Whetton and his people dealt with in no uncertain terms. Most of them had still been in the water when the Mist disappeared, and Luffy, Zoro and Sanji had rounded them up easily, dumping them in tied up bushels on the wharf. Only Lake remained free, having surrendered himself and his father, so long as his father receive medical attention from the previously downtrodden populace.

Coming ashore, the pirates were greeted like heroes and invited to a celebratory feast to be held that evening. Sanji quickly joined in the preparations, which might have had something to do with the chief cook being an attractive blonde woman, but no one chose to comment on that. At the same time, Luffy led several of the locals in creating jail cells that Whetton and his people could escape from, and Chopper saw to any injuries among the prisoners after actually somehow reattaching Philip's sliced off arm. It would never have the same range of movement as it had, but it would still serve. Zoro on the other hand just decided to take a nap on the Resolve.

While this was going on, Nami went back to shopping with Makino in tow. She had a list of plumbing materials and other things, including tiles, which Ranma wanted to use to redo the shower area, something she was very eager to see get done.

While she would have preferred to immediately begin cataloguing her newfound gains. Instead she simply set up a small photo lab, which took much of the remainder of the day. With that done, she went to find Henzo holding her copies of the Rainbow Mist series under her arm, sans the one Henzo had already taken.

As she had known she would, she found Henzo in his lab, sitting in the dark of the interior. An opened bottle of wine was open on his desk, with two more empty ones on the ground completed the tableau.

He didn't look up when she entered, but Robin took no notice of that, setting the books down on the desk. At the thump he looked up, but then away, a surge of anger going through his features, only visible in the sunset coming through the open door behind Robin. "What's that for now! What use are they now." He growled. "ninety plus years, ninety plus years I've waited, and what happens, the Rainbow Mist won't let them go!

"Perhaps, but I had another thought I wished to share with you. Time paradoxes like I described do exist but there is another sort or paradox." Robin replied, calm in the face of the old scientist's bluster.

Henzo actually paused at that, staring at her thoughtfully. It was obvious her words had restarted his brain. Robin smiled at that, then touched the books. "The other sort is the kind which occur when an individual already exists in some form. Literature on what happens in such a happenstance is mixed, but many writers seem to think that two of the same person cannot

exist in a single dimension. That could mean your friends are out there somewhere already, or came out somewhere in the past to us, but the future to them."

Now Henzo's eyes were alight with hope and Robin smiled, turning toward the door and exiting quickly. "Just a Thought, Henzo-san."

"That was a very good thing you just did," Luffy said from the darkness, nearly startling Robin enough to make her jump.

One hand going to her chest as she felt her heart beating rapidly, Robin glared at Luffy, who pushed himself off a rock he had been sitting on, seemingly waiting for her. "Were you following me, captain-san?" she asked, knowing the nickname irritated him. She used them for everyone occasionally, but rarely for Luffy for some reason.

"Nope, was actually going to drag Henzo to the party, figured he needed. You did a much better job giving him hope than I could. So like I said, that was a good thing you just did."

"Thank you." Robin replied, looking away. "I know only too well what it feels like to have your dream snatched away from you. I did not want Henzo to do something he would regret."

Luffy nodded, moving over to walk beside her without a word. Somehow though, that was enough for both of them at the moment, and they walked in companionable silence back to the main town.

The crew and the locals partied throughout the night, the pirates gleefully ecstatic with their spoils. The pictures, the mech suit Lake had used in his battle with Zoro, the books, medical equipment and everything else that they found was stored in the ship. In fact, the hull was completely full of stuff now. The hold and Robin's room in particular were filled with stuff, and Chopper's office was only slightly better because he had tried to organize as they went, while Robin and Nami hadn't.

As ship's purser and cargo master (a job she split with Sanji), Makino was rather irritated with the clutter, but just as happy about the total haul. "Better to have too much and need to organize it, than to not have anything at all."

Two days later, the crew left with a grateful populace waving them farewell. And barely half a day later, four Marine vessels arrived at the island. At first three of them were being towed behind the lead vessel, a galleon to the three schooners, but the three schooners were rowed into the cove, up to the wharfs, while the Galleon had to drop anchor a ways away from the shore.

On the first ship which tied up to the wharf were several faces Henzo had, even after Robin's little pep-talk, thought he would never see. Having joined the delegation of

townspeople to welcome the Marines, he gasped stepping forward from the line as he saw who was in the lead of the Marines. "Rapanui!?"

"I told you I'd see you again old friend!" Rapanui said gleefully moving over to the old man, and grasping him in a hug fit to make Henzo's old ribs creak.

However, while the former Pumpkinhead Pirates reunion was garnering some attention, the majority of the townsfolk's attention was on the extremely beautiful looking Marine Captain, who strode down the gangplank from the schooner and clicked her fingers. "You," she said pointing at a random one of the citizens as she barked around her long cigarette. "Tell us what has been going on here."

The tale that followed seemed somewhat fantastical to Captain Hina, but she had been born and even traveled a lot of the first half of the Grand Line, so she wasn't about to scoff at anything. *Still*, she reflected looking over at the more senior captain. *I can leave Rapanui here to take care of things while I continue with my own mission.* "Two days you said it would take the Log Pose to set and the Straw Hats left barely half a day ago?"

When she received a hesitant but affirmative reply, the locals after all had no desire to help her to hunt down their saviors, Hina scowled, turning back to the ship. *Hina irritated! I'd hopes to make up time, but were still behind them. Still, we can catch them up at the next island perhaps. I will need to see what information new have about it first, but I refuse to fall further behind Luffy and his crew!* She paused at that, and scowled even harder, nearly biting through her cigarillo. *I mean, Mugiware, Mugiware and his crew, not Luffy!*

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That evening found the crew of the Resolve going about their business on the ship. Sanji and Zoro were training ostensibly, or rather having a full on brawl to one side of the main deck. Chopper was busy trying to understand the various medical equipment and pills he'd found, testing them each in turn and taking meticulous notes on each.

He was in a very, **very** happy place at the moment, as was Robin, organizing her new book collection. She wanted to read through the journals they had discovered first, using them as a basis to translate the books written in different languages. She would wait to examine the pictures until after she was done with the journals.

Luffy in contrast wanted to examine the pictures first and was irritated he needed to wait until the pictures finished coming out of the chemical solution. But even with those not ready he could have examined a few of the devices they had found, in particular a gun Sanji had brought back. It was in pieces, but it looked interesting.

But instead Makino had shanghaied him to join her and Nami in the main hold. There the bursar was going through what they had discovered With Nami, who was more interested

in trying to estimate how much they had than to organize the hold. Nami was positively giddy, and kept on hugging Luffy as they went through it all. "This is my idea of paradise!"

"That's nice and all, but I'm hungry" Luffy said, blushing slightly as Nami kissed him on the cheek right next to his mouth, "And I can't eat gold or jewels. I'm going to go put a stop to Sanji and Zoro's flirting, and see if I can get our cook to actually make something.

Nami laughed, turning away suddenly grateful that Luffy hadn't either noticed or wasn't going to comment on their near kiss. Makino had seen it, and she cocked an eyebrow at the younger girl, who quickly turned away, resolutely not meeting her gaze.

There was a festive atmosphere that night, as the crew had a more much more personal party to themselves celebrating their latest victory out on the main deck. This ended abruptly however when Nami screamed in shock, staring down at the Log Pose on her wrist. "What the hell!?"

The rest of the crew quickly gathered around her. "what's wrong Nami?" Luffy asked for them all, resting a hand on her shoulder.

Nami held up the Log Pose to eye height so they could all see what had caused her shout. "It's it's pointing up on a diagonal! **UP!** What the heck is going on?!"

End Chapter

Yes, the fights in this chapter were nothing to write home about. But let's face it, at the Straw Hat's present strength, could they be any other way? The next real fights they face will be in Skypiea. Enel in particular is going to push Raffy harder than he has ever been before. I have a few plans for Jaya first though that we need to get through before that point and I think at least a few of what I have planned there will also surprise you all.

Anyway, hope you enjoyed, and remember to check my profile for the poll when I post it tomorrow night.