

Ooh, this was hard to get done. I had to head to my Great Uncle's place. His wife broke her leg and he threw out his back while they were finishing up a long string of tasks around their new home. A lot of stuff. Time consuming and frankly stuff that made my back sore, let alone the old man's LOL. I loved spending time with him, he's one of the coolest guys around, but I had only a few hours in the morning to myself to work on my fanfics. Argh. Anyway, here it is.

This chapter has been edited by Tomon. Give him some thanks for pointing out a few errors of character shall we say and one major issue with the fight scene. Hiryo has now looked it over for his Ranma and One Piece knowledge, and I have also finally gone through it with Grammarly. Let's see what an impact that makes...

Chapter 21: Moving on is Hard to Do

Luffy woke up. Something that honestly surprised him a bit. He had honestly thought that when he closed his eyes, he might've ended his journey right there, might have opened his eyes to find Belldandy and that other rhymes with itch standing in front of him. Never in his life as Ranma or in this world before had he taken anywhere near as much damage as Luffy knew he had taken in this fight. It had pushed him to the limits and beyond. *It was only my will that kept me going at the end.*

He tried to open his eyes, only to fail as he decided that yes, everything hurts. Literally, every inch of his body hurt, well beyond anything Luffy had ever felt before. Even the incident with the Full Body Cat Tongue when he'd blacked out from the pain of trying to change into his male form paled. Hell, even the times he'd been splashed with cold water while half-submerged in hot, when his very molecules seemed to want to pull him in different directions, wasn't this bad after the fact. At least after the feeling had faded, he had been able to move his body, and it had faded quickly. This pain was not going anywhere. *How badly did that lightning bastard screw me over?*

With that thought, Luffy finally opened his eyes and tried to push himself upright. When he tried, a large hand pressed his head, the only part of his body that had moved, back downwards. *I tried to lift myself up from my waist. But only my neck responded. Not a good sign.*

Above him, Chopper's large face appeared in his vision, occluding the sight of some kind of tent roof beyond, and blurry though it was, Luffy could still see the frown there easily enough. "If you try to move again, Luffy, I'm going to sedate you, and then tie you down like I do with Zoro. And then we will play the 'does it hurt' game, when I know full well that everything hurts right now for you. Understood?"

Through cracked lips Luffy smirked up at his ship's doctor. "I see you're getting to know the eccentricities of your patients all too well, Chopper. So tell me, how am I doc?" Luffy questioned the little reindeer seriously, his voice a rasping, cracking thing, a mix between simple disuse and lingering pain.

Chopper shook his head. "Your body took so much damage from the lightning, I didn't want to use a defibrillator, but you, well your heart stopped several times Luffy. You were so badly hurt, for a while I thought no matter what I could do, you'd fade away. You didn't, which I'm still surprised by, and I put it down to the equipment we got from within the Rainbow Mist, especially the artificial heart machine I used on you and a few of the pills. They acted like concentrated nutrient supplies, and a few of the creams, which deadened your nerves. But you're not going to be moving for a while, even with your healing ability."

"And my actual injuries?"

The reindeer man winced as he shifted forms, hopping onto the bed next to Luffy's head so he could keep talking, while examining him with a series of things in his hand that Luffy couldn't quite see clearly enough to make out. "Your healing ability still astounds me. We've been feeding you intravenously for a while, and your body has been converting it to energy as fast as we've been feeding you. No sooner do we have a batch of food ready to go through the tube, then your body is finished converting the last bit. But it had to repair sinews that were literally fried to a crisp throughout your body, bones that were turned to powder in your limbs, numerous severe slashes and bits of your flesh that had been charred to nothing."

Chopper shuddered, his entire body shaking, making the bed of island cloud that Luffy rested on quiver under him. He had never seen anyone that wounded before. Even now, five days after Enel's death, he still couldn't believe that Luffy was still alive. The number of injuries he had sustained would have been enough to kill an entire crew's worth of normal people.

Regaining control of himself, Chopper went on. "You'll have a devil of time building up your muscle mass again after that, not to mention your motor control. If not for your healing powers, I would say you would be crippled for life, but as it is, I just don't know how much of your healing ability will help with those. It hasn't done anything with the scars that you've developed on your arms during the last few days as you regrew your electrocuted skin, and your legs are just..." Chopper shook his head, his expression one of almost comical astonishment. "You were apparently using Geppo almost all the time during that fight, and because of that, you did even more damage to them than the rest of your body. Your tendons and muscles tore themselves loose from the bones there, and in one case with such force, they broke through the flesh. But again, they're healing."

"It's almost like cheating isn't it, Ki-assisted healing," Luffy quipped, winking at him feeling better now that he knew that his ki healing had been working overtime for him.

Chopper growled, shaking his head. "You should've been out for weeks, not barely five days! But like I said the moment we started feeding you, you started healing. As a Doctor I'm uncertain if I should be interested, or frankly appalled by how energy intensive the process is."

"Appalled?" Luffy prompted, cocking his head, with some difficulty. Had he mentioned everything hurts?

"You have eaten more per day than any ten men should be able to. It makes that joke that Sanji sometimes makes about me being emergency food rations seem all too plausible," Chopper answered dryly.

"I wouldn't do that to you, Chopper." Luffy waited a moment, then went on. "Venison's never been my choice of food, regardless of how hungry I am."

Chopper growled and hopped off the bed, saying, "Well, you're obviously feeling better. I'll tell the rest of the crew. We'll see if I can keep them calm enough to let them in here one at a time."

As the reindeer left, Luffy looked down at himself. Most of his body was covered with a blanket, so he couldn't see the damage his chest or legs had taken, which according to what Chopper had just told him, was probably a good thing in terms of his legs. What he saw was the wounds to his arms and upper chest. Electrical scarring ran up and down his arms from the wrists up into his upper chest in weird whirling shapes of darker skin. Luffy noticed that the scars disappeared down his chest underneath the blanket. *It makes sense that my hands aren't as scarred, I was using Haki on them right up until the end. The rest of me, not so much.*

And Luffy knew from experience that that kind of thing would probably stay. With everything else his ki healing was going to have to be doing, healing cosmetic remnants like that was going to have to wait, and if he waited too long, the scars would become a permanent part of his body. He might still be able to heal some of them, but not all of them. *Meh, gonna have to ask what Robin thinks of them, I suppose. Some people say chicks dig scars, but does Robin?*

That was as far as Luffy's musings got before there was a loud shout of "He's awake!" from multiple voices outside the tent. A second later, the crew burst in, being held back by Chopper in his monster form as they all shouted his name. The only one missing was Makino, something Luffy noticed and which worried him tremendously. He knew she had been alive if badly hurt, but had her wounds overcome her? An icy tingle of fear went down his spine at the thought.

Behind the crew, Hina and the few surviving Marines were also there, one or two of whom Luffy recognized from when he had arrived on the Resolve after Enel had finished his work there. Even the marines looked ecstatic that the pirate captain was awake, whooping and hollering just as loudly as his own crew.

Chopper shouted at them, "Goddammit! Don't just bowl him over all at once! He's still healing, and even the slightest impact could setback his healing for days!"

From the back of the crowd slowly calming down, Nami, Robin and Hina all watched, having been unwilling to join the scrum as Chopper had stopped Zoro, Sanji and then the others. Now, Nami shifted around them, moving past Chopper with an adroitness that showed her previous calling as a thief very easily.

Luffy looked up at her, smiling faintly despite the fact he was now feeling a little tired. *Damn, my body really does need energy to keep the healing going, doesn't it?* "Hey, you. I'm surprised that you're not trying to find that ship of Enel's, with all the gold it was made of," he teased gently.

"Don't even joke," Nami retorted, shaking her head, the concerned look on her face fading thanks to his joke to be replaced by something Luffy couldn't quite make out as she quipped, "As much as it pains me to admit, there are other things more important than gold. Sometimes anyway."

At that the orange-haired girl leaned down and gave him a kiss on the forehead, while also intentionally giving him a look down her bikini top, that many men would have cheerfully killed for, something that Ranma tried desperately not to notice, uncertain what the shift in blood flow would do to his currently ravaged body. "You really had us worried, you know," she added as she pulled back. "And... thank you for coming to my rescue again."

Nami's teeth gritted angrily as she shook her head. "I, despite everything else, I had forgotten this little baby," she added, tapping the weapon at her side, which in his current state Luffy hadn't noticed before this.

It was the jutte that Luffy had taken from Smoker, which he had left with her after giving her the dressing down before the party with the wolves. But Nami hadn't even seen it and had completely forgotten the fact that it had Seastone in the tip.

Luffy had forgotten he had left it with her too. In fact, he'd forgotten the weapon entirely. That was a mistake he acknowledged, thinking about how the battle had gone. *If I had that with me during my initial ambush, I might've been able to finish him off right then and there!* "Ok, I'll be taking that back from you, I think. I also kind of forgot it, so don't feel bad," he added, staring at it.

Nami just nodded, as Chopper finally convinced the rest of the crew to calm down.

"Business first," Luffy announced in a louder tone, one of his fingers twitching. He glared down at it and the arm attached to it shaking his head. "That was supposed to be my attempt to raise my entire arm, so I think at the moment Chopper's word is law and what he says goes."

"If I see his eyes starting to droop, I'm chasing the lot of you out," Chopper growled. "Don't touch him, or I will kick you out. Don't try to help him sit up, or I will kick you out. And if he gets too excited, then I will kick you out. Do you understand what I've said, or should I kick you out?"

With a nod to the irate Doctor, Zoro came forward, nodding firmly to Luffy. "Good job. You beat on that bastard hard. His body was still here when I got up here. And boy was that a trip and a half. But that sight made it all worth it."

"A trip and a half for someone else who shouldn't be **freaking** moving!" Chopper growled. "

Zoro shrugged, but Luffy noticed that his upper body was still wrapped in bandages, and his hands were in heavier casts. His legs looked fine, which he commented on. "Chopper, my lower body's fine, I can move. We're all okay," Zoro went on, turning back to the captain. "Makino is the only one that is not already up and about. The love cook took a lot of damage too. But Chopper's got both of us on so many painkillers that we can barely feel our own faces, so we're good."

"Which I'm going to stop if you don't stop moving!" Chopper shouted, pointing it Zoro.

Zoro grumbled at that, then looked back at Luffy. "Beyond that, we're safe for now. Whatever issues been going on between the Shandians and the Skypieans is over with. I don't think it'll be breaking out anytime soon, considering the Skypieans only have that one group that we thrashed with their idiotic berets and the Shandians are... they're down to only a few effective fighters too. None of whom are on top of their game, whatever that one warrior is trying to talk up. Wyper, I think his name was? Tough bastard."

Sanji nodded, indicating Zoro remembered the right name, astonishingly enough.

"That's good, at least. The last thing I wanted to hear was that we were still stuck in a possible warzone. Well that, or Hina turning around and arresting all of us in our weakened state," Luffy sighed and leaned back, closing his eyes. He heard Chopper about to start to give orders before he opened them looking at Chopper. "What about Makino? And the rest of us?"

"..." Chopper looked at him closely before he decided Luffy was still well enough to continue the discussion. "Despite what I said earlier, Sanji is sort of all right. Of the three of you, he's the least wounded, although his legs took a bad pounding, and I don't want him up on his feet for long. Practicing Geppo is out of the question. He can move, but I don't think that his legs could stand the strain of that without doing permanent damage."

"Zoro is a freak like you." Chopper went on bluntly, causing both men to chuckle. "He should be either dead or crippled for life given the amount of electricity he took, but his body's

healing fast too. Although oddly enough, I think his body runs on alcohol rather than actual food."

Luffy guffawed at that and grinned at his first mate, who grinned back, before Luffy asked, "The girls?"

"I took some electrical damage, but nothing serious. My body still spasms occasionally, but that's all," Nami interjected before Chopper could reply.

Chopper nodded toward Nami to indicate she was right, adding, "But those spasms were kind of bad the first day, and I have been watching her, everyone else, pretty closely. None of you have the natural healing effect of a Zoan type, like me, so you really shouldn't be healing as well as you have been."

Not having the energy to nod, Luffy replied that was fine. But he was still looking at Chopper, his brows furrowed in noticeable worry.

At that look, Chopper sighed, looking away, knowing this wasn't going to go over well. "Makino... is a concern. She not only took more damage than Nami, quite a bit more, but she also took that lightning damage almost all at once. But she was also using Busoshoku and that saved her. I'm uncertain when Makino will wake up, but she will. I thought at first, well, I thought I might've lost her at first, but Conis and I were able to stabilize her. She'll pull through. She's tough. This entire crew is tough," he said proudly.

Chopper carefully didn't say that he would only know the real extent of Makino's long-term damage when she woke up and started to move and speak once more. It was entirely possible she might have taken some permanent brain damage in the lightning attack.

And Nami's twitches were not the minor things she had tried to play them off as. Her spasms had begun as quite nasty at first but were decreasing in severity every day.

But in a comparison between the two women, Nami was in a far better state despite that. She had only taken a single low powered attack. Makino had taken several full-powered assaults. She had been treated as a threat, Nami a curiosity at first and then an annoyance. It was only Makino's durability and use of Haki that had saved the older woman's life. But that wasn't something Luffy had to hear right now.

"I told you when you joined up Chopper, monsters come in all forms. And this group of monsters is proud of it," Luffy quipped, although he did note that Chopper was worried about Makino, something that sent a frisson of fear and guilt down his spine.

To one side, Nami scowled, gripping the handle of the weapon in her hands tightly, thinking dark thoughts about how well she had withstood this test. She'd tried, and

intellectually Nami knew she had tried her best, but her best had been well below what everyone else had done, even Chopper.

She then looked down at the weapon in her hand, her thoughts shifting targets. *My brain is my real strength, I need to find a weapon that can let me use it. And... and I need to take my training more seriously from now on.*

Luffy didn't notice all that, looking over at Hina. "And what about Hina here and her crew?" he questioned, looking back to Chopper.

"Like Nami, Hina can speak for herself, thank you," Hina answered tartly. "But, my crew is now barely down to a squad level. Ironically, the Marines I took with us into the forest are all still alive, if heavily wounded. My previously injured were killed to a man, and only two of the able-bodied crewmen I left behind survived Enel's sudden appearance, with Crenley and my ship's nurse dying with them. Hina saddened." She saw Luffy's face darken and spoke up quickly. "Do not blame yourself for that. We underestimated Enel and his willingness to target those who had already supposedly escaped his wrath going by his own rules. Even if we had run as I initially hoped, we would have been forced to face him when he came after us."

"...Yeah, I guess so. We forgot that Enel was the one who made the rules." Luffy nodded, slowly but resolutely. He knew that he'd still feel a little guilty about it, but as he thought of it, it really hadn't been his fault.

For one thing, the Marines weren't his crew, and in fact, Hina and her followers had placed themselves in this position when they had, even in his opinion, foolishly decided to come after him again. He knew Hina would be feeling that guilt for a while. And again, as Luffy had just agreed, they had underestimated Enel's willingness to game his own system.

Setting such thoughts aside, Luffy turned his attention back to something more important. "Now, what's the status of the Resolve?"

"I'm not good enough with carpentry to tell you the full extent of the damages to the Resolve, but it's been hammered captain. I'm sorry," Zoro scowled, fingering his swords with his heavily bandaged fingers. "I should've done better. I should've protected the ship better, protected Makino, Chopper and Nami better."

"I told you before, Zoro. At this stage, running into a logia user like that, you couldn't have done any better than you did. Use this experience as a motivator to get stronger," Luffy interrupted Zoro's self-flagellation. His eyes sharpened, and a feeling rippled out from him as he looked at Zoro, his eyes suddenly not those of a man who looked like he should be recovering from near death, rather they looked like a warrior who could march into the fires of hell and come out the other side. "Get stronger. Because I guarantee, in the New World we'll face threats even greater than that overconfident asshole. Only by getting stronger can we all achieve our dreams."

While many of the marines reeled backward under that sudden change, Hina simply nodded to herself internally, once more repeating what had become something of a mantra to her, *Dangerous. This young man is dangerous. I do not know where his will comes from, but Smoker was all too right about him.* Her lips quirked ruefully as she finished the thought. *And I still can't convince myself that it's entirely a bad thing despite him being a pirate...*

The response to this little speech from their captain was met by surprise in Chopper, awe in Nami and Robin, and fierce grins on Sanji and Zoro's faces. "Oy, oy, captain, the Moss-head isn't the only one who wants to get stronger after this," Sanji interjected.

Looking at him, Luffy realized with a start that he wasn't smoking for once. Nor was Hina.

"Feh, as if a Love Cook like you could ever be strong, number three," Zoro scoffed, before replying in the affirmative to his captain's declaration. "Yes, captain."

"Good. Now, just give me a report on what you can tell me about our ship," Luffy ordered, leaning back and sighing, letting his bodies exhaustion be seen once more.

"Well, like I said, the ship was mangled badly." Zoro was not someone who would ever pull his punches, and he put this as bluntly as possible. "All the masts are gone. The main mast was shattered from the top down by lightning strikes. The others burned starting with the rigging. There're cracks in the deck too, and maybe below them as well. The entire aft deck was also seared away."

Nami interrupted here, giving her own opinion. "Most of that could be repaired, I think. But the damage from the lightning strikes to the main mast and any hidden damage below decks is probably worse, and none of us know enough to tell you more. I also think we need to get the ship out of the water and check the keel. I helped direct it up that river to the entrance to the Ordeals, and even in the river's weak current, the Resolve was wallowing. Badly."

Looking around, Luffy saw Sanji and Zoro both nod, having been part of that effort. Even a few of the marines, Fullbody among them, nodded, indicating they had seen the same thing.

"The first thing I'll do when I'm able to move is to take a look at the ship," Luffy answered after a few seconds. "Given the destruction of Skypiea, I doubt the locals have any shipbuilding capacity any longer. And frankly, the Resolve has seen us this far, I'll be damned if we just abandon it now."

"You might be able to be moved in a day," Chopper responded. "Once I'm certain that the jolting that you'll take when we carry you down giant Jack won't damage you further. No way is anyone in this crew going to do Geppo for a long while, so we'll have to climb down."

"Not even Hina?" Luffy teased, looking over at the marine captain.

Hina shrugged. "Hina can use Geppo, but not well enough to believe she could get herself down from this height without any lurching." She then smirked, looking between the pirate captain and his crew. "Besides, would any of you trust your captain to me?"

"Oddly enough, I think I might," Zoro muttered, shaking his head as he looked at the female Marine. "You might want to capture him or maybe even kill him. But you'd do it straight up, not behind his back and not when he's wounded."

Hina's eyes widened at that, before she smirked slightly, nodding her head to the first mate's accurate understanding of her personality. She might have said something, but at that point, the flap to the tent reopened, and a new woman came in. Luffy remembered seeing her before, during his and Aisa's arrival on the Arc Maxim, but not close up.

Now he did and realized with a start that she was tall, as tall as Hina or Robin. She had long black hair done up in a ponytail, trailing down near to her lower back. She was currently wearing a skirt that covered down to her and knees and a blouse, which covered everything that it needed to while baring her taut, toned midriff. A few of her fingers had also been tied together. On one foot was a large solid cast. She was smoking a long cigarette, rolled up very thinly, around which a smirk could be seen.

She held up a hand to Luffy in some kind of formal sign that reminded Luffy of pictures he had seen of Native Americans in his old life once. "Greetings. My name's Laki, I'm sort of the de facto spokesperson for my tribe with you Blue Sea dwellers since I was the one to push for a ceasefire with you all. That, and I'm part owner of our tobacco farm."

She tossed over a bag of something to Sanji, who caught it eagerly. Then she turned back to Luffy. "We owe you," she said bluntly. "My people, the Skypieans, everyone who lives up here in the sky owes you. That's a debt none of us are going to forget anytime soon. While the Vearth of Upper Yard might have survived repeated lightning strikes, none of us would have survived them. If you need anything while staying here, just ask."

"Laki has also told us that she made the Burn Bazooka Wyper was using. He's the one who attacked our ship down on the White Sea," Robin supplied, looking at the woman to which Nami twitched, not having heard that before. Sanji was already going into his swoon, dancing around a bemused Laki.

"Weapons designer?" Luffy perked up, hopping on that topic instantly. "Really?"

Turning from the now heart-eyed Sanji, Laki nodded. "Yes. I created most of the more advanced weapons the best fighters among my tribe used." She chuckled wryly, "Looking back on it, wish I'd made myself one you know, but there were reasons at the time."

"Well now." Luffy began with a grin that would have been accompanied by a handclapping in hand rubbing, if he could move his hands, before suddenly clamping down on

his delight, shooting a glance at Hina. They might be allies right now, but that didn't mean that Luffy wanted Hina to know everything they were doing. Far from it in point of fact.

She seems to realize that, and after a moment's hesitation, nodded abruptly to him, and turned away. She chivvied the marines out in front of her stating that it looked as if Ranma was becoming tired. When the pirates were alone with the Shandian woman, Luffy turned back to her. "You said anything we want, right?"

Laki nodded.

"Even some of the city's gold!?" Nami asked, starstruck.

"Sure, if you want it. To us, it's just a nice, shiny building material. We've got so much of it, it isn't really important to us," the black-haired woman answered, shrugging.

"Bah, we have enough gold," Luffy waved that off, before raising his voice to override Nami's shriek of 'There's no such thing!' "What we want are dials. A lot of them. Literally, as many of them as you can give us. And we'd like someone who can tell us how to weaponize them too. Both for us, and to help us repair our ship. We even have other... resources aboard the ship."

He shot a look at Nami and Zoro to which Nami nodded, coming back down from her earlier automatic anger at the idea of anyone thinking there was any such thing as too much gold. "Despite having to move the ship and its damage, no one's been down below past the crew quarters, Luffy."

"Good. Anyway, we have some things on the ship that could also be used to make weapons. If that is, we can trust you to keep what you find there to yourself."

At that, Laki's eyes widened, but after a moment's hesitation, she replied steadily. "If not for you, most of my people would have died with the Skypieans. We owe you. If you want my help, I'll gladly give it."

"Good. We'll talk about that more later. But what about your people?" Luffy asked solicitously.

"We were hammered hard," Laki replied bluntly. "We barely had enough braves left to even find our wounded scattered across Upper Yard. If not for Aisa and her ability with Mantra, we would never have found any of them. We've spent a while finding and bringing them e. And even then, we wouldn't have been able to see to their wounds, if not for the raccoon here."

"Gods darn it, I'm not a raccoon! I'm a reindeer! See my horns! How many times do I have to tell you!" Chopper shouted, pointing at them.

"Oh, just one more time, oh mighty raccoon of healing," Laki mocked.

Glaring mightily, Chopper waved his hands "Out! Out all of you. My patient needs rest, and at least three of you need to get off your feet too! That includes you Laki!"

"Not just yet," Robin replied, and something in her voice stopped Chopper in his tracks, as she moved around him to stand by the bed, subtly but very surely pushing Nami to one side. "I won't attempt to do more than talk to him, but I do require some time with the captain."

"She can stay," Luffy spoke up before Chopper could protest.

Sanji's eyes narrowed, but with a glare from Chopper, he subsided. "Damn it Luffy, if you do anything to Robin-chan, don't think I'll make your death quick."

"I'll be certain to tell Conis that you have such fickle affections Cook-san," Robin quipped, causing Sanji to stiffen and nearly bawl his eyes out, making it easy for Chopper and Zoro to push him out of the tent.

Nami made to protest too but found herself also pushed out of the tent before she could formulate the words to do so, and she could only send a glare back into it at towards Robin. *You're not the only one in this race any longer old hag!*

During the past few days among much soulsearching, Nami had decided to try for Luffy. But that hadn't meant she had any desire to share him, despite her earlier thoughts on that matter. It had nothing to do with morality, though. Nami couldn't care less about common morality before she became a pirate after thieving from them for most of her life. No, it had everything to do with jealousy and knowing herself. *Whatever I might have thought after, after seeing them making out in the woods, I know I am not going to share. You might be in the lead now, Robin, but I'll catch up soon. We'll see who's pushed aside then.*

For a moment, Robin frowned, staring back over her shoulder. *Odd, for some reason, I have a desire to use a Clutch on Nami.*

Shaking that thought off, Robin sat down next to her captain, her man, she now knew, and waited until Chopper had moved to the tent flap, far enough away to give them some privacy. She took Luffy's hand in both of hers, squeezing gently as she spoke, her voice low yet heartfelt. "You worried me tremendously. Very, very much so. I have been traveling the Grand Line for years, and I have never seen anyone come back from the injuries you sustained against Enel. Do not do so again."

"You know I can't promise that," Luffy answered softly, squeezing her hands, grimacing at the effort it took. In fact, for all of his effort, his fingers barely twitched in her hand, making Robin all the more anxious, but she said nothing, shaking her head.

The two of them silent them, with Robin squeezing his hand and staring into his face with Luffy staring back, a crooked smile on his face and a tender one on hers. Then she shook herself and went on, "However, you haven't posed the question I know is uppermost in your mind."

Luffy blinked, then asked slyly, "What panties are you wearing?"

"Black lace at present," Robin giggled, shaking her head, "and if that was your question, I would be rather surprised."

As Luffy laughed, Robin decided to tell him her news without further foreplay. "I found it. I found the Goro Goro Devil Fruit."

That caused Luffy to whistle in surprise. "Truly? A part of me was wondering if it should be found again at all. That kind of power is kind of horrifying when in the wrong hands, of which there seems to be far too many. But I suppose if it was going to be found by anyone here, I'm happy to have it with us. Does anyone else know?"

"Sanji knows I was looking. But he hasn't spoken of my search or asked if I was successful. No one else has any idea. At the moment, it's hidden under a piece of random Island Cloud cover. Do you want to eat it now?" she questioned, assuming that Luffy would be the one to use it.

"No chance," Luffy replied, trying once more to shake his head and failing miserably. "First, I have no idea what that thing would do to me now in my wounded condition, and I'm not going to chance it. Moreover, even if I was at one hundred percent, I'd wager that eating a logia style fruit has an immediate, noticeable impact, bits of you turning into lightning or flashing from one point to another and so forth. I do not want that at all, nor do I want to deal with the local's response to it."

Robin winced, acknowledging that point and Luffy continued. "Also, just like the dial-based weapons, I don't want to even think about doing anything that will so obviously add to our danger level until we're away from not until we're done with Hina and her marines."

At that, Robin's lips quirked, and she leaned forward over the bed, giving Luffy a look. A look that Luffy couldn't quite interpret. Amusement, annoyance, and something else was in there too, but he couldn't tell what. "You sound almost sad about that?"

Missing what that look could mean almost entirely, Luffy just shrugged. "I don't have a problem with the Marines stated mission; it's how they go about it. And the fact that they turn a blind eye to so of the WG's bad points bothers me. As for Hina, I like her despite her and her troops being marines. She's straightforward, competent, always willing to improve, what's not to like?"

With that, Luffy turned back to the previous topic. "And I don't know if I want it at all anyway. I have no idea what the mental impact would be, and I don't know if being a Lightning man would fit my style. Not when I'd have to spend so much time training it up, ignoring Haki and my training in it, which is what I really want to push from now on. Busoshoku can let me fight logia users on an even footing, and I need to get better at it than I am now. I also need to get better at, well, thinking forward. Not making mistakes any longer. Someone else can have the Goro Goro no Mi."

Robin shook her head. She could not think of any other pirate captain who would so blithely think about handing over power like this. And that was what a fruit like this was, simply and earnestly, it was power. A lot of it. *Then again, so is the Busoshoku and his Haoshoku.*

Luffy fell silent, thinking deeply, then sighed, speaking even more quietly so there was zero chance of Chopper overhearing. "Get it to me as soon as possible, I will put it in my ki space. I'll slow my body's rate healing down so I can reserve my ki to do it."

"You are in that much control of your ki?" Robin mused, somewhat baffled as she always was when they talked about such things.

Without even closing his eyes, Luffy reached inside himself. He felt the Haoshoku within him, coiled around the weak, gleaming golden thread of his ki. It was weak, that thread, barely noticeable. But even so, he could feel it respond to his call. "My ki is me, and I am my ki," he said, somewhat poetically. "Yes, I am fully capable of doing that. And there's no way anyone else will be able to get to it once it's in my ki space."

Robin nodded slowly, still staring at Luffy. "In that case, I will return tonight." Without any warning, she leaned over and kissed him hard on the lips, so hard it stung, his lips having still having been cracked from the amount of electricity his body had taken. But that didn't stop Luffy from opening his mouth slightly, allowing her tongue access.

From there, Robin dominated the kiss in a way that she knew Luffy wouldn't have allowed had he been up to his normal strength. Then Robin pulled back, licking under and all around Luffy's tongue as it quested for hers outside of his mouth between their mouths for a moment. She actually sucked on his tongue at one point, a move that caused him to groan and to feel his blood start to flow in an entirely different direction.

Then Robin abruptly pulled back, smirking at him. "Let's call that incentive to get better." she quipped, winking at him and turning away. She swished her hips as she went, but that proved to be a step too far.

Watching her hips, Luffy started to lose consciousness dropping back into sleep, his body just unable to sustain this level of activity.

Staring over her shoulder at the flap to the tent, Robin let loose a wicked giggle, shaking her head. *First time I've made a man lose consciousness through blood loss without using a weapon.*

A second later, Chopper passed her by and Robin slowly hastened her steps away. She was barely a few feet from the tent when his roar reached her, causing her to laugh aloud once more in a way that as little as a month ago would have seemed impossible for her to even contemplate. "Dammit! I knew that he wasn't feeling 100%, what the heck!"

Yes, I have a rather unique captain, don't I? she thought complacently. *And an even more interesting man in my life.*

OOOOOOO

As she was walking away from the tent where the pirate captain was being looked after, Laki turned as she heard her name called, one eyebrow rising as Nami hurried up to her. The two of them had talked occasionally since Luffy had fallen unconscious, along with Aisa, Robin and Hina, but never for long since Laki was always so busy helping to find the others. Despite that, Laki was happy to talk to other women who were so strong in a world that seemed to be dominated by men.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" Nami requested, looking around. "But not here."

This whole area was busy with both Skypieans and Shandians on top of the pirate crew and the marines. Most of them were just here to stare at the giant bell, while others were here to talk to the Blue Sea dwellers, or before today, to try and gape at the unconscious form of their captain, the man who had killed God.

Not just killed him but ripped out his heart, Laki thought, staring towards where blood had drenched the sky cloud to one side. That had not been cleared away. *Amazing. Absolutely amazing.*

Turning back to Nami, Laki nodded. "Where do you want to talk?"

Nami pulled her to the side of the tiny island cloud towards her Waver she had been given by Conis' father, Pagaya. Laki stared at it, smiling even now at the sight of it. It was a very well-crafted little thing. *And that old Skypiean had made it within a few hours. Pretty darn good work.* The material wasn't so great, but the way the ship had been crafted and the Jet Waver nestled into the tiny ship's aft was fantastic.

"Come on, we're going to the Resolve," With that, Nami hopped aboard the Waver, sliding the odd weapon she'd been carrying today into the side of the vessel so that it was stuck underneath the seat.

"Why?" Laki asked cautiously as she got behind the girl.

"Because no one else is there right now," the orange-haired girl replied as she leaned forward, sending the edge of the waiver off the edge of the sky cloud and downwards.

Laki had barely a second to scream before she was bouncing the small Waver in midair. Somehow, Laki wasn't certain how, Nami was using the air patterns around them to control the waver's fall, bouncing it lightly this way and that until they slammed bottom-first into the side of Giant Jack where they began to ride down the twisting beanstalk's vines.

Soon after that, they reached the newest addition to the sky river, which had been created to help transport Skypieans deeper into the interior of the holy land and to Giant Jack. It had been used by this point to resettle all of them into the city of Shandora, both Shandians and Skypieans.

At the sight of it, Laki frowned slightly. She hoped that there wouldn't be a resumption of the violence that had so permeated the Skypieans in the Shandians history. But thrust into such close cohabitation, and with Sky Island gone, it will be hard for people from both sides to lay aside old prejudices. *Thank god it's not my problem*, Laki thought complacently.

"Hey, you can let go of me now," Nami said over her shoulder.

Laki blinked and realized she had still been gripping the other girl hard across the chest and stomach, one of her hands practically squishing one of Nami's tits flat. She flushed in embarrassment, releasing her with a mumble of, "Sorry. But next time, give a girl a warning!"

Nami shrugged at that, not replying further. They moved through the Island cloud-created river silently until they came upon the Resolve. It had been dragged deeper into the river that fed into Upper Yard, then tied to the entrance to the four ordeals, where it lapped gently by the riverbed.

Laki looked at the ship in some interest. She hadn't been aboard before this, having been busy with finding her people rather than helping the Blue Sea dwellers move their ship. But she couldn't help but be impressed. It was damaged sure, but it was like their captain, like their swordsman. "Damaged, bleeding, broken. But not beaten," she whispered, patting the shattered remnants of one of the masts as Nami hopped off the other side of the Waver.

"Heh, I like that. I didn't know you had such a way with WOOOOOAGH Aisa!?" Nami suddenly yelped, leaping away from the side of the ship.

Blinking, Laki turned that way too before gasping in shock. *How the hell does the Lord of the Sky hide so well when it's so huge?!* "Aisa, what the hell are doing here with Cleo?"

Aisa looked up from where she had been sitting staring at the ship from the port side as did the giant snake underneath her. The young girl was sitting on top of the giant serpent's head. Ever since the bell had been rung, the snake, who Aisa informed everyone was named Cleo, had been almost docile. It seemed to have bonded with Aisa, who could somehow command it.

Both snake and girl blinked at Laki and Nami, then Aisa seemed to shake herself from head to toe. "There's something weird about this ship," she said finally. "It's a thing. I mean, I can see it's a thing but..." he scowled, then looked away. "Nevermind. What are you doing here, Laki, Nami?"

"I wanted to show her something and have a girl to girl talk," Nami answered.

"Wait, what, girl to girl talk? I am the last person you should be coming to for that," Laki interjected, staring at Nami. *Wyper and I flirting until he began thinking I need to be a stay-at-home wife is not the basis of any kind of great knowledge in that area for me, that's for certain.*

"Not that kind of talk, don't worry, I can handle myself in that arena. It's something else, something you can hopefully help me with."

"Oh, that's alright then," Laki breathed out in relief.

Aisa nodded at that, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere already. "I felt their captain reviving. But he's sleeping again. And Wyper and the chieftain are talking. I think I'm going to go and play with the wolves for a bit. That's a conversation I don't want to be within a mile of."

"What conversation?" Laki quickly questioned, wary once more. Things with Wyper were never simple.

Aisa shrugged. "You'd be surprised what grown-ups say when they don't realize a kid is listening in."

The two women stared at Aisa in confusion, but she didn't reply. Instead, with a gentle pat on the head and a whispered word, Aisa sent the Lord of the Sky into motion once more.

Shaking her head, Nami turned her attention back to the matter at hand. "Come on, what I want to show you is down below. But, um, first I have to tell you to keep what you see a secret. You know that the Marines aren't exactly our friends?"

"Barely peaceful allies but past and future enemies, right? That's the way it's been explained to me. You all are technically outlaws, and they are enforcers for the world government, which acts much like Enel did or something like that." Laki nodded. "And if you have secrets aboard, you should probably talk to Aisa. She was here a second ago, and she

might've done some exploring. She's just that kind of girl," Laki tone was half-amused, half proud. "So was I when I was her age."

"So's any girl worth their salt. I'll remember," Nami agreed with a chuckle. Then she looked at Laki, biting her lip as if trying to come to a decision. But the look was over before Laki could call her on it and she turned around abruptly. "Follow me."

Now beginning to get a little annoyed by this, Laki did so, marveling anew at how light and yet powerful the cast that Chopper had given her was. The thing was so light she could barely feel it, and yet she didn't feel any kind of impact or pain when she put it down. He had filled the cast, which was made of wooden and metal slats, with a layer of Island Cloud, and that seemed to take every kind of jolt she could think of.

Down below in the hold, she was led through the main gun deck, then deeper down to where the crew had their quarters, and from then into a locked room. It had several locks on it and was very clearly the crew's strongroom. "Are you sure you're supposed to be showing this to me so soon? I know your captain said I should have access to it, but I thought that meant after he was up and moving."

"Ehh, I might be jumping the gun, but I'm a pirate. I'm not going to ask permission, maybe beg forgiveness afterward, that's about it. Besides, you're not going to be interested in the gold."

Laki chuckled at that, nodding her head in agreement. The wreckage of the ark had been found earlier on the second day after Enel had been defeated, and the excavation had begun. It had caused a row among the Blue Sea dwellers, but a short one, that Zoro had won against Laki's current companion with a short, abrupt gesture of negation and a growl.

But Laki's thoughts didn't stay on that. Instead, she was staring at the piles of interesting, bizarre, and above all, new and unusual stuff that was in the room. Some kind of large outfit or something, but made of metal and other material? Bodysuits that looked to be created out of some other kind of cloth to go with the large suit. Books. Gears of metal and wood working together to move a large open-faced thing with a set of what looked to be numbers around a circle. A kind of gun but one she had never seen before with a strange cylinder. "Okay, you've got my attention. But what am I looking at here?" she asked after nearly ten minutes of staring.

"This was a suit of moving armor though it's previous owners called it an exoskeleton, which Chopper had to explain to me. But the main point is, this thing was created, a weapon. This," she said holding up another piece a gauntlet that ended not in hands but in two large forklike tines pointing forward, "was the gauntlet that I used to redirect the lightning, create my own little bit of lightning and used it to deflect the attacks Enel launched at me. And this," she added, holding up the weapon that she'd had earlier, "is another weapon that we came up with after its previous owner tried to fight Luffy. It's called a jutte, and it has Seastone in it. Laki

jerked in shock, staring at it then back to Nami, who shrugged uncomfortably. My captain left it with me. With us, the ones that left aboard the ship. But I forgot it was here."

Laki opened and closed her mouth a few times, then slowly nodded. "Okay, I'm not going to get angry at you, so far after the fact. Especially since I know you've probably been beating yourself silly about it."

"You better fucking believe it," Nami practically snarled, sitting down on a crate that held several books that Robin had yet to go through. She waved Laki to a seat, which Laki did, looking at her in question.

"I was pathetic in this entire thing!" Nami suddenly burst out. "My... our captain believes in training, in sharing the techniques he's learned with the rest of us, in pushing us all the time. But ever since I joined this crew, I haven't been pushing **myself** as hard as I could be. Luffy called me on it before this all began. But there's only so much I can do physically. I'm not a fighter like him, Zoro, Sanji or Chopper, and I don't have a Devil Fruit like Robin's. I'm not a natural in your face kind of combatant. But my mistake was to stop looking for other ways to fight. As part of this crew I need to be able to hold my own, to at least look after myself."

"Against Enel? There's a reason why we called him Kami, you know," Laki retorted, slightly uncomfortable with the other girl's self-deprecating, self-agonizing tone.

"Maybe, but against threats that are a little less than him? Like that sword user, the one with the bald head. I should've at least been able to help against that threat, even if Enel would have taken it poorly." She pointed at Laki. "And that's where you come in. You know dials, you said you're a weapon designer. I want a weapon of my own. A weapon that I can use that enhance my strengths, one that I can use to, to even the playing field. I'll keep training, I'll take my training as seriously as I can, but I still want a weapon, something that can take advantage of my mind. Can you please help me?"

Laki sighed, nodding her head slightly. "I can understand that. I'll help. But, you have to tell me what you're good at. And, what kind of weapon are we talking about here? Heck, what kind of material?"

"I'm good with a staff, with sticks, I'm okay with a gun, but not great. Staff and sticks I think are the way we should go."

"Would your captain mind if we did something with that?" she asked, gesturing to the Jutte. "And how much of it is Seastone?"

"Just the tip," Nami replied. "The previous user was a logia user, so he wouldn't have been able to touch the thing even through a glove if that wasn't the case."

Laki's eyes widened. "You mean there are more like Enel?!"

"No, no," Nami waved her hands wildly. "There's only ever one type of logia user at a time, but there are well a lot of different types of elements. The one who owned this jutte was able to turn into smoke."

Laki's eyes remained wide as she stared at the other girl. "Are logia -type powers so plentiful down on the Blue Sea?"

"No, they are still pretty rare. I'm just saying there's more than the Lightning type that Enel had. None of the ones I know about though could have boasted about being invincible like the Goro Goro no Mi

"Thank whatever true gods exist," Laki breathed out in relief.

Nami grinned suddenly. "How about this, I tell you about our adventures so far on what you call the Blue Sea, and you helped me with my weapon."

"Deal. Give me that staff, then stand up, I want to take some measurements. After that, tell me how you joined this crew first. I gather there's a tale there."

Nami laughed with both remembered happiness and new delight at having a real weapon to call her own. "You better believe it!"

OOOOOOO

At the same time that the two women got down to business, another conversation was taking place, one that, as Aisa had hinted at, wasn't going to be pleasant for anyone involved.

The chief of the Shandians was not the kind to really command or belabor people into obeying his orders. He was very much a soft-spoken sort of person, who led the tribe because of his great experience, level head, and knowledge of their past, not because of any kind of overwhelming force of personality.

However, the look he was using at the moment on Wyper made it truly clear that he was the one in charge. "Warrior Wyper, the last of our able-bodied warriors are once more on their feet, and the last of our dead found and buried. It is thus time to discuss your place as War Chief."

To Wyper's side, Kamakiri and Genbo stirred, but a single glare from the chieftain in their direction caused them to still. Those same eyes stayed on Kamakiri as the old man continued. "Warrior Kamakiri, is it true that when faced with the priest Gedatsu, and his ordeal of Swamp that Warrior Wyper ordered the warriors to split up into small groups. Without any kind of organization, without any kind of direction?"

Wyper held up a hand before Kamakiri could speak. "It's true. I'll own up to a mistake there."

"Mistake?" The old man now scowled, a look of anger on his face that none of the younger men had ever seen. But then again, none of them had seen the old priest preside over so many funerals, one after another, before either. "Warrior Wyper, a mistake is something that only costs our warbands a bit of blood. This mistake cost us the majority of our warriors! The three of you and fifteen others. Eighteen warriors alive! Only five of the Warriors who followed you on the second day of your attack will ever be in fighting shape again."

Most of the other warriors bar two who had been left behind entirely due to leg wounds had been those sent back after the initial clash with the priests that had been interrupted by Luffy's arrival with the Lord of the Sky. They had proven invaluable in the days that followed Enel's death.

"And even that," he went on in a slightly less belligerent tone, "is because of the largess of that dear raccoon fellow of the Blue Sea Dwellers. If not for him, all five would be dead, not simply in no shape to fight."

High above them, on the Island Cloud platform that held his crew and the golden bell, Chopper suddenly burst out, "Gosh darn it, I'm not a raccoon I'm a reindeer!" to the shock of the man he was examining.

Realizing the old man had every right to be angry, Wiper began in what he thought of as a placating tone. "I have already admitted that was a mistake. I did not know the extent of the priests' preparedness or the skill or numbers of Enel's Supporters." This might have worked if he hadn't then added, "But regardless of how weak we are now if need be to protect Shandora, we can train more..."

The crack of the chieftain's cane on the rock underneath them was audible, and all of them winced, twitching away at the sudden sound. "No, we can't!" the chieftain sighed, sagging back into his chair as he turned aside to stare out over the city of Shandora, watching as Skypieans and Shandians moved about the city.

Even now, five days after its discovery, many of those men and women were simply gawking at the majesty that was Shandora. *But was it worth the price the tribe paid? When I was younger, I would have felt it was. I would have felt that regaining our past was worth any price. But now?*

"Of the remaining tribe, there are only twenty-two children too young to be Braves just yet and a hundred and forty-two men at all, most of whom are well past the normal age to be among our warriors, many with old wounds that would make them unable to fight at all. They are fathers to Braves, rather than Braves themselves now. Braves," the chieftain went on even

more softly staring at Wyper, "who you led to their deaths... for nothing. Many of those men, and their wives, are demanding I exile you for your part in this disaster."

Wyper seemed to flare up at that, as did the others, but now the chieftain barked out, "For nothing!" raising his voice for the second time. "If not for the Blue Sea dwellers, **all** of you would have died for no reason. Enel would have gone on to raze Sky Island just as he did now only far faster, and then would probably have hunted down any survivors. It is only because of the Blue Sea dwellers, and their captain's frankly insane courage that any of us are alive today."

The other two warriors looked at Wyper, wondering what he would say. That they would follow Wyper whatever happened was something they didn't even think about it was so automatic. But the tribe would follow the chieftain, Kamakiri suddenly realized. The tribe had been willing to pay the cost of reclaiming their land. But now that they learned they would've paid that cost and would have lost anyway? That their sacrifices had been completely beside the point? That it was a random group of Blue Sea Dwellers who won the day? That was pushing it.

When Wyper spoke, his voice was soft, a far cry from his normal belligerent tone. "What would you have had me do instead?"

"I cannot fault your decision to split the warriors up, although I can fault your lack of organizing such an act. And you had your plan, the hidden piece of Seastone. But the moment that failed, you should've tried to find your fellows warriors, not pushed ahead yourself. After it became clear that you had no chance of stopping Enel, you should have retreated.

The chieftain sagged once more. "Furthermore, when our warriors had taken such casualties, when your plan had failed, you not only kept going but attacked another group with which Laki and Kamakiri at least had forged a temporary truce with. A group that contained the man who saved us all from Enel's wrath. You, you let your pride and your desire to see this conflict through blind you to reality. And because of that, I am removing you from your position as War Chief. You need to learn some of the leadership of the great warrior Kalgara rather than just as combat skills before I can reinstate you."

As Kamakiri and Genbo choked and spluttered and Wyper just stared back at him, the Chieftain let loose a bark of laughter, shaking his head. "It's not as if there is going to be another war. After all, there might be less than twenty of you, but the only warriors among the Skypieans are McKinley and his white Berets. Neither side can afford to fight any longer."

Wyper was distracted as he stared upwards, seeing a Waver coming down, moving towards the white river. Aboard he saw Laki, clinging to one of the Blue Sea dweller women who was doing the controlling.

That's a strange sight, he thought, before shaking his head and nodding to the chief. *And yet, it also brings to mind what else I have to live for now.* "I agree. I, I think it is time

for us to shift from being warriors of justice and vengeance to warriors of defense. I think it is time to think about consider the future rather than fight for our past."

The chieftain nodded, pride showing on his face, happy that Wyper could see that. Although inside, he was wondering how much of that was because they had reclaimed their homeland, and how much of it was the fact that the bell had been rung and that apparently a descendant of Cricket had been waiting below on Jaya to hear it. *And how much of it is...*

At that moment, the bell tolled from above, as it had every day since it had been reclaimed. Two of his people and two of the Skypieans rang it, a staccato rhythm *bong, bong, bong, bong* loud and echoing across the White-White Sea, and down to the Blue Sea apparently, according to the Blue Sea Dwellers. It reminded everyone of what they had discovered, it reminded everyone of their freedom.

By the time the chieftain finished smiling at that sound, as he always did, someone else had approached the little group, skating up towards them on the top of the ziggurat through the air to land nearby, his hands held out in token of peace. "I come to talk with the chieftain of the Shandians," he intoned formally. "I'm unarmed."

"Ah, McKinley," the chieftain greeted with a nod gesturing the man closer. "Can I help you with something?"

"I'm, I'm hoping you can."

"If I can help you, I will," the chieftain answered simply.

McKinley sighed, seeming to stare into the distance before turning his head to look at the chieftain, Wyper and the other two warriors. He nodded to the three younger men respectfully before concentrating on the chieftain. "Our old Kami-sama, Gan Fall is dead. We finally discovered his body this morning. He was, was seemingly struck by lightning, concentrated into a tinny, finger-sized stream. It caused his heart to burst in his chest. He, he was then just kicked over the side of the Blue-Sea dweller's ship after trying to come to their air. Sky Sharks have been at his body, but thanks to the armor he wore, there was enough evidence of that."

Once more, the Skypiean sighed. "Really only Pierre, his trusty bird, believed wholeheartedly he might still be alive, but we all, a part of us I suppose had hoped it would be otherwise. But with him dead, and with Enel also having slaughtered all his previous advisors, we Skypieans have no leaders any longer. I have been basically shouting people into going along with things, but, but I think we need a single leader between us."

He looked searchingly at the old chieftain, willing him to understand. "You can rally both sides. You've always been a spokesperson for peace talks the very least, and you already lead

your people. You helped out when the war ended, pushing to join us when Chopper led the Blue Sea Dwellers to warn us. Would you be willing to take up the position as Kami over us all?"

The chieftain sighed himself now, thinking about the ancient Gan Fall, who he had spoken to several times during peace talks. Those talks had never gone anywhere since neither side was willing to give up on what they wanted either to reclaim or to keep at the time. But Gan Fall had been the first Kami to ever open the door for such. Yet, even so, that didn't matter now. Now he needed to make certain that the war could not break out again, and what better place to do that then as leader of both peoples?

"Very well," he said formally. "But, I have two orders right from the start. One, the position should no longer be called Kami. We will find something else. Over-Chief perhaps. I care not so long as it has no connotations of overwhelming power and tyrannical authority any longer. And second, the moment that the pirate captain is well enough, we will be throwing a party of truly magnificent proportions. I would urge everyone to prepare for it."

All four younger men in front of him grinned at that, and McKinley nodded eagerly.

OOOOOOO

It had been three days since the Saruyama Alliance had decided to quit the island of Jaya and chase dreams elsewhere. For that was what really united them, the two monkey-like brothers and Mont Blanc Cricket: chasing dreams, proving people wrong, always trying to find out what other people thought of as simple children's stories. The hidden mysteries of the world were what they enjoyed searching for.

It was well, they had left because as Ranma was waking up, war was coming to Java. It wasn't apparent to anyone at first. With most of the pirates dead, overwhelmed by the Marines and the Straw Hat crew at sea, there was no one left to even try to slow the Blackbeard crew as they returned to port, having spent more than a week out on the ocean, unable to find their way back and clinging to the remnants of their ship.

They were noticeably surly about their time in the ocean and had cheerfully started to ransack the town, beating down anyone they saw, setting alight to any of the buildings that didn't have anything they were searching for. Booze and pies in the case of the captain, bullets and wine for Van Augur.

And of course, anyone owning a ship that could carry them out of here. That had been the first thing the Blackbeard Pirates had secured. Even now, Blackbeard's first mate Burgess was watching the ship for them as his captain, Doc Q and Van Augur were having fun in the town. None of them had any carpentry skills. Not that they had been spoiled for choice. After less than a week, there was no way the pirate population of Jaya could have been refilled.

"That's right! Burn it all, smash everything. They call this place pirate heaven, show them what being a pirate really means! If you're not strong enough to keep what's yours, then it's ours!" Blackbeard bellowed along with his signature laugh. "Zehahahaha!"

"Hey Captain, *ha, Hack*, why aren't you using your powers?" questioned the ship's doctor, Doc Q, his words interrupted by his perennial hacking and coughing. "If we're supposed to be putting the fear of the devil in these people, then surely a little bit of darkness would do better than all we've been doing."

"Now, now, Doc Q. That wouldn't be right at all, Zehahahaha!" Teach guffawed. "Besides, I told you all I wanted word of our deeds to spread. How will that happen if we kill everyone before they can spread the word? It's about notoriety, fame Doc Q. And then **fear**."

"That's right," Van Augur tone was philosophical as always. "The world is moved by the strong, yet it does not mean that the strong need to be serious with every opponent. Would you use your full strength to," Van Augur smiled faintly, gesturing to the apples in Doc Q's grip, "pluck an apple as you would to tear someone's throat out?"

Blackbeard and Doc Q both laughed, but that laughter ceased abruptly as a new voice intoned from nearby. "Funny talking about morality given what you did, Teach. Although I suppose you might not have told your new crew how you left your old one yet, have you? Or are they real scum of the seas just like you?"

All three of the men in the street turned to that new voice, staring at the man who had just appeared on a nearby rooftop. A second later, there was a tremendous booming crash from near the docks, and Van Augur instantly turned in that direction, staring. When he spoke, his urbane, cultured accent was gone. "Captain, the ships. Our ship, all of the ships!"

"After so long, I wasn't about to let you get away," Fire Fist Ace said as he looked down at his former crewmate, a thin, cold smile appearing on his face. "That would have been ridiculously stupid of me. And I might be many things, but stupid is not one of them."

"Ace, it's good to see you!" Blackbeard shouted, throwing his arms wide as if he was happy to see the other man while on the inside, he was furiously thinking, wondering now. None of his crew had much skill with boatbuilding, and if Ace had indeed just destroyed all the ships in port, they were going to be stuck here for a while. And they had just basically been destroying the rest of the town themselves. They would be in for a tough time. *Still, perhaps it isn't all going to be bad. Ace is a big enough name for what I want.* "Have you come to join my crew?!"

"Cut the shit Teach," Ace Shook his head as he tossed his hat to one side to land on top of a still intact chimney, staring down at the three other pirates on the street below him like a judge about to sentence someone to the gallows. "You know why I'm here. You broke one of the ultimate rules of the sea, one every pirate must abide by. You killed your own crewmate."

"Ah, Thatch. I'm sorry, but it had to be done. I've studied devil fruits, studied them all my life. And there was one, just one that I have always been after, that I vowed I would pay any price, do anything to get my hands on. And then it appeared before me in Thatch's hands. I had to kill him, you see. Had to kill him to get it. That fruit was the entire reason why I joined Whitebeard in the first place!"

Ace didn't reply to that, simply narrowing his eyes as he analyzed Blackbeard, and the two with him. He didn't know enough about Teach's true fighting potential, really, but then again, Teach didn't know much about him either. While Ace had kept up his Busoshoku training in secret, he had mostly relied on his fire abilities since joining Whitebeard and ascending through the ranks of his crew. Only the old man, Marco and Juzo knew about his Busoshoku skills. *It should come as a surprise for this piece of shit anyway. But has he been keeping secrets too?*

"Listen, Ace. Whitebeards old! I'm not the only one to think it. He's been keeping a lid on all the world's oceans by the power of his name, his word of retribution, but his time is ending. My time, our time is now. I mean to make myself a Shichibukai, then a pirate King. I have a plan, from beginning to end, to get me there! What will following Whitebeard get you? Just more years of stasis, of nothing in the world-changing as that old man grows older until he starts to really lose his grip. The time to strike is now!" Teach roared, his voice ringing with certainty and fervor, his eyes wild. "Join me, Ace. Together, we will be the strongest crew in the world!"

"I said to cut the shit Teach," Ace growled. "I didn't come here to join you, and you know it. I came here to avenge our crewmates. To bring your head back to the old man."

"Well, that's a shame..." Blackbeard began before Van Augur opened the battle.

Shots rang out but did absolutely nothing as Ace just dodged them, the supersonic bullets moving almost in slow motion to him. Only one of them actually hit him, going straight through his fire form body.

A second later, from the side, a house that had previously escaped destruction was hurled at Ace, as the Burgess made his appearance. He had jumped clear of their ship just before Ace's fire had hit it and now roared in anger. "You bastards! That was our way only way off this island!"

The house was incinerated with barely a glance from Ace. Then he flashed forward, becoming fire as he closed with the Burgess.

"Dammit!" Teach shouted, and suddenly from all around him, an aura of blackness appeared, which shot forward from his outstretched hands. "Black Spiral!"

Ace had barely launched a fire javelin towards the Burgess, who screamed as it impacted his leg, searing through his leg turning it into so much ash and greasy smoke at the hip before he was pulled away, his fire powers suddenly dying out around him as he found himself being pulled towards Teach by a limb of darkness.

He grimaced in anger, launching fire attacks towards Teach, who grunted in pain as they struck, before bringing down a fist on Ace's back. Ace barely had a second to set himself and call upon his Busoshoku before the blow crashed down, and even so, it rattled his bones, slamming him into the ground. But Ace kicked off the ground an instant later, his own fist coming up coated in black to slam into Teach's large gut.

Teach gasped in agony, and he stumbled back, his offensive use of his powers fading even as he used his black hole powers to keep canceling out Ace's fire attacks. *Fuck, since when could Ace use Haki!?* Several more lances of nearly white fire flashed towards him, only to disappear into the blackness around Teach.

At the same moment, Van Augur tried to get involved again. But once more, his bullets simply passed through Ace's form. A second later, Ace jumped forward, becoming a battering ram of fire that burst through two buildings, catching up to Van Augur a second later.

"Van Augur! Get out of here you can't..."

Blackbeard's warning was too late and too slow. Ace wasn't here just to kill Blackbeard, no he wanted to wipe out everyone and everything associated with the man. He wanted to make it as if the bastard had never existed.

Even as Van Augur attempted to dodge, a hand of fire so hot it looked white caught his face in a vice-like grip. A second later, the screams began as Van Augur's face was literally melted off. The fire seared him down to the bone, his brain burnt into ash in his skull before even his skull itself was turned into cinders.

Ace stood up from the body of Van Augur, wiping at the blood along one lip caused by Teach's earlier hit as he stared through the town towards his opponent and the other two crewmen who had gathered around him. "How does it feel murderer? How does it feel to lose a crewmate? Get used to it."

"Doc Q, get Burgess out of here. Neither of you can touch Ace! Only me." Grimly, Blackbeard surged forward, shouting out, "Yami Yami, Gravity!" Moving faster than his bulk would normally suggest, he smashed through several still intact houses as Ace did the same. All around him, the houses and everything else was sucked towards him, disappearing into the blackness that surrounded him and somehow propelling him forward all the faster.

But Ace wasn't there. Instead, he had gone after Doc Q. Doc Q turned to a crackling noise from behind him and a heat like an open flame, twitching open his long fur coat, as he

flung it towards Ace. Noxious fumes, some kind of solvent, and several explosions were hurled in Ace's way, but Ace seared the first two apples into ash, then changed into fire, crossing the intervening distance in a flash. Another glowing red fist slammed into and through Doc Q, burning his chest out from the inside out.

That cost Ace though, as Blackbeard was on him a second later, once more reaching out to him with Black Spiral. As he was pulled close, fists flashed, one fast and light, the other one ponderous and heavy, but strong. So strong that Ace grimaced despite his own Busoshoku. *What is with this guy!? He's so freaking **dense**!*

The Yami Yami Devil Fruit that Blackbeard had eaten allowed its eater some control over gravity, just like a black hole. And like a black hole, the wearer became super-heavy. Almost like a neutron star, crushed ever tighter every time he used the Devil Fruit's power, becoming super-dense.

However, that didn't mean the hits from Ace's fists weren't hurting. Every time one hit, Blackbeard felt his body creak underneath it. Every time a fire attack somehow struck him, he had to roll to put out the fire.

Another blow landed, sending Blackbeard reeling away, but he held up a hand, and once more, Ace found himself being pulled into that grip. A punch from a fist as large as his own head slammed into him. Now it was Ace's turn to reel away, not having been able to coat his head in Busoshoku before the blow landed.

Even as he saw double for a second, Ace concentrated. From his outstretched hands, small spears of fire flashed out into Teach, who stepped backward, roaring in agony even as his body absorbed the hits. Blackbeard attempted to grapple with Ace again, but Ace lifted himself up off of his feet, mule kicking Blackbeard in the face, using that maneuver to flip himself up into the air in a move that Ranma would have had to shout copyright infringement for, before launching a medium-size fireball at Blackbeard.

Blackbeard raised his hand, and the fireball disappeared into his palm, which started to smoke and sizzle around the edges. Yet the dark aura around Blackbeard continued to grow, now reaching forward towards Ace like a series of tentacles rather than a single hand-shaped form.

In reply, Ace created his own fiery aura out, and the two auras began to combat one another. On hand thrust into the sky above him as Ace concentrated on another attack even as his fire aura was sucked away into nothing.

"It's a pity," Blackbeard shouted. "It's a pity, but your dead body will serve my end's just as well as your joining my crew would."

Ace chuckled dryly. "Counting your bodies before they're on the ground Teach? A rookie mistake if ever there was one." With that, Ace launched his attack. "Great Emperor!"

The blackness around Blackbeard surged in reply, snuffing out the fire. But the blast of fire was so big that Blackbeard couldn't see Ace behind it. Ace took that moment to charge forward, the last thing that Teach had expected.

A second later, Ace was in his face, his entire body now coated in Busoshoku. Ace couldn't hold this form for long, but he hoped he would be able to hold it for long enough.

Blackbeard's eyes widened in shock. "What..."

A punch landed, nearly shattering Blackbeard's jaw, followed by six more in quick succession to his chest, each blow cracking a rib despite how super dense Blackbeard's body had been made since he had eaten the Darkness Fruit. A return blow sent Ace staggering, but he moved with it, twisting into a kick that caught Blackbeard in the stomach. And this time, instead of cracking his rib, something inside, his intestine or lung Ace didn't know what, burst. He could feel it under his foot.

Blackbeard doubled over and was completely blindsided by Ace's other foot coming up in a mule kick that caught him straight in the forehead. The blow would have broken even someone like Blackbeard's neck as near as month ago and now hurled him backward ass over kettle.

He still was able to get up, though, pushing himself to his feet as his own limbs started to show the blackness of Busoshoku instead of the smoky outline of his Yami-Yami aura. "You're not the only one hiding an ace up his sleeve," Blackbeard laughed at his own pun and charging forward.

The two of them continued to wail on one another for several minutes, Haki against Haki, with Ace emphasizing his Busoshoku against the Darkness fruit, Busoshoku could even the playing field somewhat. Not a lot, and given the ongoing impact of using the fruit, it's effect would continue to grow. At the same time, he started to use his fire powers in a new way.

"Explosion Punch!" he shouted, blasting out a tongue of flame from behind his elbow. This acted like an explosion almost, launching his fist forward faster than before. Ace wasn't certain about the science of it, but it was the same way he could use his fire powers to power his personal ship.

"GUoh!" Blackbeard bellowed, taking the blow in the gut, but his Darkness aura had eaten a bit of the flame, causing the attack to lose some of its force. It hurt like blazes, but he took it and returned a kick that nearly caught Ace in turn.

It would have, if not for Ace using the same technique again from his feet this time. "Explosion Jump!" The aptly, if rather lamely, name pushed Ace into the air over Blackbeard's kick, and Ace rained down several hard blows before once more the Darkness Aura around Teach caused his fire to die out. He took a hit to the side from one of Teach's giant fists, which sent him crashing sideways, but he had covered his side with Busoshoku just in time. Once more on his feet, he charged forward behind another blast of fire that, while it was sucked away into the Darkness aura around Blackbeard, still blinded the other man until Ace was once more in his face.

Again and again, this kind of exchange repeated itself. Ace took hits, but rolled with them, blocking as much of them as he could with Busoshoku, hammering back at Teach, slowly wearing him down. The aura of Darkness was so strong now that Ace was forced to husband his fire magic, using it to negate his Gravity attack, using it to blind or try to break away from that technique. Luckily it seemed to take a lot out of Blackbeard too, and he couldn't use it often, and Ace's Busoshoku saved him from being hammered too badly.

For his part, Blackbeard also could tell, knew that despite his durability, he was getting the worst of this fight now. Ace was just a little too fast, a little too skilled to hit constantly. For every one blow that Blackbeard could land, Ace was landing six, and Blackbeard's Busoshoku was starting to fail him. Blackbeard's blows were still more powerful, and he could tell that Ace was tiring, but tiring fast enough? *Is my body going to last, or will it give out before Ace's?*

Yet for all that both were worried about how long they could sustain this level of punishment, the fight was decided not by their durability but by their footwork. One moment, Ace was stumbling back, reeling under another blow, and Blackbeard stomped forward to land another one and hopefully take back the initiative of this fight, gathering his Devil Fruit power to use his Gravity attack once more.

The next, Blackbeard's footing gave out, crashing through some of the rubble they had been standing on. It threw off his balance, and Ace instantly recovered and went on the attack. A point-blank blast of fire crashed into Blackbeard, hitting his outstretched hand, and to Blackbeard's horror, his Busoshoku finally faded under this assault burning the limb entirely away up to the elbow before Teach's Darkness Aura could negate the fiery blast.

He screamed, grasping at the stump of his arm as he rolled away from Ace, staring up at him in shock. "Gaaa, you, you... how are you so strong!? Where was all this all these years with Whitebeard!?"

Ace for his part simply stood there gasping, blood dripping from his mouth, one eye closed, having been hammered by another blow from the older man before he could armor his head against it once more. His ribs were creaking, and it was taking all he could just to stand upright.

Despite that, Ace **was** standing and had all his limbs. Blackbeard could not say the same.

"I'm not going to answer a dead man's questions." Raising both hands above his head, Ace began to call on his fire powers once more.

Blackbeard attempted to do the same thing, but in his heavily wounded state, with only one arm, and dealing with the pain of that wound, his aura barely covered himself and he couldn't push the blackness out towards Ace in an attack, only barely covering his own body with an aura of Darkness once more. "Damn you! I won't die here, I won't! My dream, to be the Pirate King! To own the greatest treasure of all..."

"Somehow I just don't see it happening," Ace replied dryly, as the attack above his head grew to look the same size as the entire island. "Solar Eternity!" he shouted, launching his attack forward.

However, before the attack could strike, Ace's eyes widened, but too late.

Something small and very thin wound around his head and pulled. Before he could turn himself into his fire form, a Busoshoku fist crashed into the back of his head, sending him to the ground. There he tried to push himself to his feet, but two Busoshoku assisted stomps into Ace's already abused head, and he slumped into unconsciousness, his durability finally overcome, although this didn't stop the kicks from raining down on his head for a time.

The newcomer standing over Ace's form was tall, taller than Ace by a large margin, as tall as Blackbeard was, but much thinner. His glasses gleamed in the sunlight as he stared down at his victim. "I wouldn't normally interrupt such a fight, but I can't let you simply kill a man with such an interesting power now can I, Fire Fist Ace? The New World is calling the New Age! And I'll need Blackbeard to set it in motion. And you, or your body too, anyway."

Once he was certain Ace wasn't going anywhere, the tall man moved over to where Blackbeard was still alive, staring at him. Seeing Ace's sudden dodge, Blackbeard had rolled away from the attack, and Ace had been unable to change the attack's course. The massive ball of fire had scorched into the ground, so hot it almost resembled plasma, burning everything within to ash and dust. In a wide swath behind Blackbeard's original position, the island had been seared clean of everything, including the dirt down to the bedrock.

But Blackbeard was still alive. His arm was gone, and the other side of his body, despite his Darkness Aura, had also been near-to flash boiled from the excess heat of the attack. Half of his body now looked more like overcooked meat than a human being's body. But as their eyes locked, the newcomer paused.

The look in those eyes wasn't that of a man who had just been saved. They were the look of a man who would keep on fighting, regardless of how broken his body was. It was the look of a man who would change the world, a look the man was familiar with. After all, he saw it every day in the mirror. It was precisely the kind of look he was looking for.

He squatted next to Blackbeard, smirking at him. "Well, now. This is quite a predicament. Of course, I didn't save you out of the goodness of my heart. And you know it."

Blackbeard nodded, the move taking almost all of his energy, but he refused to show weakness. "What do you want?"

Donquixote Doflamingo, Shichibukai, smiled a smile as wide and as dangerous as the Grand Line itself.

OOOOOOO

Days passed, how many Luffy didn't know at the time as he slept through most of them, his body demanding all of his energy to heal itself despite his prideful statement to Robin. Later he was told it was another six days. But true to his word to her, the next day after he first woke up, he had created a ki space within one of his pants pockets. Luffy put the Goro Goro no Mi in there and then kept the ki space intact throughout the rest of his convalescence.

His creation of the ki pocket did, as Luffy had known it would have a negative impact on the speed of his healing, slowing it down by more than a day. Many of the scars on his chest and arms were there to stay as well, though not all of them.

Of course, when Luffy was awake and aware, he talked to his crew and the others. Hina was the third one to come and talk to him strangely enough, and the two of them had a fascinating talk about the fight against Enel, where she lambasted him for not remembering Smoker's jutte, although he retorted with "And did you remember it until you saw Nami with it?" to which she had no answer.

Luffy spent some of the time with them joking around with Sanji and Zoro. They talked about training as well, with Luffy passing on a few more meditation and visualization exercises that could help bring out their Haki better. In turn, they both told him a few leg and arm exercises he could do while in bed, something that he hadn't known about. This caused Chopper to attack them while threatening Luffy with, "A rifle-sized enema every day you try to move from that bed!"

Chopper tried not to talk to his patient at all, urging him to sleep as much as possible. This did not work and eventually, Luffy's humming of 'this is the song that never ends' forced the doctor to talk to him.

Nami was there every other day, always coming in the morning with food, talking to Luffy as he ate the Chopper-approved meal. Most of their conversations were about her past travels in East Blue, and where they would go when they made it back to the Grand Line. A few were about Vivi, but she remained a touchy subject, if for different reasons than Luffy supposed.

The most important conversation, though was with Robin the day after Ranma had created his ki space. He was still feeling a bad drain because of it and his body's ongoing demands, but Chopper had agreed that he could be moved down Giant Jack to Shandora with the rest of the wounded. The locals were going to need this space entirely empty soon as they began to make plans to lift the golden bell back to its rightful position.

As Nami steered a small waver down the twined vines of the beanstalk, Robin sat with Luffy at the back, using her powers to keep him still. This meant her hands were all over him. Nami had seen that and had to fight back a nasty glare at the older woman, knowing that was more for her pleasure than any need. However, she didn't interrupt the conversation Luffy started with Robin by asking, "So, I know you were interested in the history of this place. Did you find one of those Poneglyphs?"

"I did indeed. Though it did not, alas, have any information retaining to historical knowledge of the sort I am interested in, Robin replied lightly, though she did summon up a pair of lips behind Luffy's ear to kiss it lightly in appreciation for his question. "Or rather it would have if not for the fact Poneglyph also had a message on it from someone named Gol. D. Roger."

Luffy's eyes widened and he whipped his head around to stare at her, as Nami nearly drove them off the side of a corner rather than around the curve of the vine they were currently riding down. "What?!"

"Oh, yes. It said that Roger and his crew had come here and had followed the directions written within. But as near as I can tell, there seem to be at least two types of Poneglyphs, the differences of which can only be discerned by someone able to read the information inscribed therein. This one was like the one in Alabasta. But I think that it pointed not only to the ancient weapon but to the location of another type of Poneglyph: in Merman Island. That one will contain information leading to the next, or to information on the Void Century itself."

"Well, from what Shanks told me, Whitebeard controls Mermaid Island. It's one of the hundred-plus islands that look to him for protection. So, we should be somewhat welcome there, given my relationship with Ace. Still, that sounds like an amazing find. Aren't you happy I stopped ya that time in Alabasta, hmm?" Luffy quipped, the words light but the look in his eyes serious.

"Oh, yes. For more than just one reason too," Robin replied, before once more kissing Luffy's ear, while Nami wondered what they were talking about.

These small conversations kept Luffy going during his recuperation, until at last, he was finally up and about, able to stand on his own two feet. His legs still felt weak, and Luffy knew that Chopper had been right, he would have to work on rebuilding his muscle mass despite his ki healing. But that was okay, he could deal with that. And even more importantly. Makino too, had woken up earlier that day for the first time.

She smiled up at Chopper's worried expression, her face twitching in a rictus spasm as she spoke. "D, D, don't worry, I am n, n, not even going to try to move. I am f, fi, fine just lying in bed, b, being waited on by C, Conis and Sanji." The two of them seemed to have become something of an item since the last time the green-haired girl had seen them if how close they were standing was any indication.

Behind them came Luffy and the other two girls, and Luffy smiled at her gently, even as he tried to keep a grimace off his face. "Hey Makino, how ya feeling?"

"T, th, that is just one of those silence-filler t, type questions. You know f, full w, well that I am not feeling well right now," Makino answered tartly. But then her tone softened, and she worked to keep her mouth moving correctly, so she didn't stutter. "I am going to get better, though."

"That's good to hear." Luffy looked over at Chopper, who was still studying Makino with several different instruments before he sent them all a nod. It wasn't a very definitive one, but it showed agreement with Makino's statement all the same. "Do you need anything, can we make you more comfortable?"

Makino shook her head slightly, although she added that she would like them to look into getting some beds made out of Island Cloud, the bed Makino was in felt amazing now that she was conscious to feel it. And she was feeling positively ravenous. At that, Sanji made an elegant leg, "Then my lady, I will be ecstatic to feed you my most glorious creations."

"You do that, Sanji. Chopper, Nami, you stay here too. She might need a girl here in case she wants to get clean."

Sanji paused from where he had been standing upright, his one visible eye starting to turn into a heart. Then Conis very deliberately kicked him in his still sore legs, and wincing he regained control of himself.

Luffy ignored this byplay, turning to Zoro and Robin. "You two, let's get a move on. Now that I'm walking, we need to see what can be done with the Resolve. And someone send for Hina, her powers are probably going to be needed."

As he arrived at the ship, Luffy carefully held back a groan of effort as he pulled himself out of the small Waver boat they had all taken down from the Golden Bell. That groan segued into a curse as he looked at the ship in front of them. "Okay... I had forgotten how bad it had been battered. Hina, we're going to want to get it out of the water somehow... How thick can you make your cages?"

"As thick and as waterproof as Hina wants them to be, although once the chain touches moving water, I will have to cut off my physical connection to the cage in question. What is your plan? Hina curious," Hina questioned as she got out of the large Waver behind them.

"First, I want to get the ship out into the center of the river and hold it there. For that, we'll need large planks to hold it in place once we drain out the river. Zoro that will be up to you. Measure the distance and cut me some trees. Then I think we'll first drop some boulders down into the holes here, block up the river upstream once the ship doesn't ground itself."

Under Luffy's direction, the work began and continued throughout the day and into the night. Luffy occasionally helped with lifting the boulders to the river's edge, which would then be used to block the river where it flowed towards the entrance to the Four Ordeals, but that nearly knocked him back out, sending flares of agony through him, and he slipped back into an advisory role, cursing his current weakness. Soon they had the ship set up on a thin layer of chains, with which they held taught as the water was slowly cut off upriver. Then Zoro and more than two dozen Shandian and Skypieans rushed down, propping and tying the ship in place.

Hopping down into the waist-deep water, Luffy felt the change happen as she moved around, staring up at the ship. "Shit..."

Zoro, next to him, looked at him in confusion. "What?"

Hina hopped down, standing next to the redhead, and nodded her understanding. "Hina displeased. Do you see those cracks in the thicker portion of the wood running prow to aft? That is the keel, the most important piece of the ship structurally-wise."

"Right. The cracks aren't big, but they look like they've been there for a few days, you can tell by the angles the cracks have taken that they were much smaller originally. But I think we can still repair it, caulk, steel plates over that, and then... maybe more steel along the entire keel if we can. The rest, it looks like we'll be busy for a while replacing bits and pieces of the planking. The mast... let's go see how that looks."

Unfortunately, the lightning and fire damage had indeed cracked and burned the mainmast, the cracks continuing down to its base. There it had burned several segments around where the mast moved down past the main deck. "Shit. We're going to need a new mainmast. That is going to be a bitch, and most of the work will have to be done by you, Zoro, weak as I am right now. Let's work on removing the damaged bits now."

The group of locals broke into two teams then. One group began to scour the woods for dried, aged wood to make for planks, green planks being far too prone to warp once wet to be used in shipbuilding. Luffy helped remove the old, damaged planks as best he could, then watched as Zoro removed the masts, pulling them out one by one.

In the bowels of the ship where they had just removed one of the least damaged masts, Luffy frowned, staring at some of the damage from the inside. Next to him, Zoro too cocked his head to one side. "What the heck am I seeing?"

"A child's attempt to repair the damage, maybe? I mean, a kid comes along, sees something broken, they put a Band-Aid on it but with tape, right? Here, they just used strips of metal."

The object they were staring at was one of the cracks in the outer hull. A series of four slats had been shattered in succession, possibly from something that occurred during Enel's attack, but most likely from the rough handling the ship had been through as it was carried up the river. There was some water damage nearby, but not much.

The reason for that was the series of large bits of metal that had been hammered into the broken spars over the cracks, two to each crack. They were lain on top like a big X. But they were barely nailed in, the nails bent horribly. And what was worse, the cracks were still there, so the 'Band-Aids' didn't do much other than keep the spars intact. They didn't repair the damage as would replacing the spars entirely do.

"Do we think someone else was down here?" Zoro questioned seriously, twitching his head towards the locked, barred door of the special hold.

"Nami has the key, so that would be a no. Still, someone did these repairs. Some of them are good." Zoro made an incredulous noise, but Luffy led him back to the hatch leading in from the kitchen. There he pointed to the hinges on the hatch. "These were melted, you can see some of the original metal still there. The lightning hit, melted the original, since metal, you know, conducts electricity better than wood, right Zoro?"

"Yes, I fucking well do you asshole, my hands still fucking sting from holding Sandai Kitetsu and Yubashiri," Zoro grunted, punching Luffy in the shoulder. "But what..."

"These were replaced. The hinges are well made, from our stores, the nails were pounded in. So why couldn't the same person do that to the ones below?"

"Huh..." Zoro looked at Luffy, and Luffy looked back. Then as one, they shrugged. So long as the gold was there along with their real treasures from the Rainbow Mist adventure, neither cared. Luffy only cared about his hat, and Zoro cared about his swords, and it would be a cold day in hell before anyone got either hat or a single sword off them.

Through the rest of the day, they worked hard with the locals removing everything damaged in either Enel's attack or earlier. The earlier damage to the bottom of the hull was quite a bit more on the exterior than it had been on the interior where Luffy had checked, and he castigated himself somewhat over that now.

But the damage to the keel could be repaired, somewhat. The cracks were small, and, thanks to the Shandians, they had enough metal to coat the wounds with an added layer of protection. Luffy was actually thinking about plating the whole ship in bronze, having remembered that the old-time wooden navies in his old world had done the same thing.

The result was a patchwork ship that barely looked like a ship, really. But even so, there was enough there that Luffy and Zoro could see the Resolve there. For some reason, that was important. So important that Luffy requested that a few of the locals paint their pirate mark on either side of the ship.

After the work was done and the cannons removed, Luffy sat staring at them in thought, then back to the ship, through a hole in the side where the door to their storage room could be seen. "Hmmm... scientific inquiry goes hmmm."

The sound of chuckling drew his attention to the side where he found Laki. She sat down next to him as Nami did the same. "I can see you're thinking deep thoughts. But what exactly is scientific inquiry?"

"Er, inside joke. It would take so long to explain even I wouldn't find it funny anymore. Ask Chopper for a good explanation if you're interested," Luffy changed the subject hastily not wanting to get into that right now. "What were you two up to?"

"Trying to find the hilt of the sword Ohm used. I had a thought about how to incorporate it into Nami's weapon. But what about those cannons has you thinking?"

Luffy looked over at Nami, who scowled, looking away. "I need a weapon I can use to augment my ability to read the weather or something that can augment my physical abilities. I will be taking my training more seriously from now on too, but even with that, I don't know if I'll ever be able to reach the level I have to, to keep up with the rest of you. I need an edge."

At first, Luffy had been frowning, not really liking the idea of Nami supplanting further training with this strange, no doubt Dial-based weapon. But when she finished, he smiled at her gently a full smile of approval that caused Nami to smile back, turning her face away slightly coquettishly. "I'm happy to hear that and I promise I'll help you train as much as you want in the future."

A part of Nami shivered at that, but a larger part of her, the part that had decided she was enamored of Luffy and wanted him decided this was too good an opportunity to pass up. "Hmmm, well, I'll be sure to talk to you whenever I want to exercise. Maybe we can talk some night on making me a more personalized exercise regime."

"Sure," Luffy answered easily, not hearing any of the underlying messages in Nami's words, turning to address Laki. "I am just thinking about firepower, really. The Resolve is never going to be able to really take as much punishment as a galleon or other larger warship. But even with a single gun deck, there needs to be something we can do to add to our firepower."

"Sure there is." At this quick response, Luffy furrowed his brows, and Laki sighed. "I'm my people's chief weapons maker. And I can tell you about four different ways to make those guns better than they are."

Luffy nodded. "Yeah, you told us that, didn't you? And I told you we'd be interested in it, or rather dials? Something like that. Sorry, my memories of the past few days isn't the best. What are some of your ideas?"

"Well, I think I could use some of the things in your hull to create a giant flamethrower for the front of the ship. It would be on a swivel mount, and it would be short-ranged but could be devastating against other ships. For your cannons, I could create the same system that makes up the Burn bazooka. There's also been an idea in my mind to use my attempts with Brahm's weapons. His flash guns shoot their bullets out faster than normal pistols, and there's no reason why I couldn't simply upscale that technique."

"Huh, you have a mind well trained for mayhem, don't you? Any chance of you having a dream of becoming a pirate?" Laki laughed at that but did look a little wistful for a moment. She didn't say anything though, and Luffy let it go for now. "Do you think you could talk us through doing something like that? Only, I don't want the marines to know what we're doing."

"Ah, that might not be a good idea. Dials are tricky things, and even people trained in them have a lot of trouble with mixing them together at times. We've been running into issues there over the past few days. Still, I bet I could come up with some written instructions. The only problem is, I can only write in my people's language."

"Robin will be able to read it," Nami and Luffy answered as one, before laughing. Robin was not there at present, helping out a group of locals who were looking for fallen logs to be used in the reconstruction.

As they got themselves under control, Luffy waved over Pagaya and a few other dial engineers. "Well, for now, let's talk about what you can do to my ship, hmm?"

The answer was quite a lot and it began at the ruins of the Arc Maxim. While no one among the Shandians or Skypieans were at all willing to repair the thing. It was the reason why Enel had seen fit to launch his insane attack on them after all. But most of the ship was salvageable.

This included several dozen large breath dials right off the bat. And many of them were already on hinges, so they could be twisted this way and that, or pulled behind apertures so as to be hidden. Eleven of these were given over to the Resolve. Four would be installed on either side of the ship. Submerged in water, they wouldn't work as well as the more powerful Jet Dial on the tiny Waver that Nami was so enamored of, but they would be able to move with them if slowly. Three more would be installed elsewhere on the ship. No longer would the Resolve be a slave to the winds of the Grand Line.

Luffy also took several of the gears and energy collectors, storing them with the rest of their treasures. Since none of the locals knew what those were, it was an easy sell, but Nami's eyes had lit up when she saw them. She and Laki became thick as thieves for a time, with Laki

staring at the things as they were hauled by Zoro back to the ship. Then Laki went back to working on Nami's weapon and collecting interesting dials for the crew. She didn't do anything with the weapons just yet, but she would soon.

With the locals, Zoro and Robin's invaluable help, even the lack of Luffy's brute strength didn't slow the operation all that much. So by the end of two days, as Makino was slowly getting over the worst of her spasms and getting her motor control back, the ship was repaired. A large majority of the keel had been covered over with an iron layer, acting like a sheathe to the wood made of different plates. The wounds to the sides had all been replaced, the Breath Dials emplaced. The masts should have, by their sheer size, taken up a while to move and put in place. But Zoro helped there, as did Robin with her hundreds of hands when it came to create the rigging of them. Finding appropriate logs had taken them longer than actually putting them up.

And it also turned out during this time that while Luffy hadn't been worried about the marines for nothing, they hadn't exactly been searching out his crew's secrets either. One day, when he was taking a break to talk to Aisa about Kenbunshoku-style Haki, Hina caught him before he could return to the Resolve. She had been out with her marines, keeping them in fighting shape by joining the hunting parties, using bows to bring down game for the cookfires. For a time, there wasn't going to be enough agriculture to keep feeding Upper Yard's inhabitants, so there was a push every day to bring in more game and edible fruits and such.

"You are doing something with the Resolve," Hina began without preamble. "You are also worried about Hina and her marines discovering what. Do not worry. I am not interested in attempting to discover your secrets. Hina unenthused."

Keeping a faint smile off his face at Hina's tendency to switch from the third person to first so quickly, Luffy cocked an eyebrow at her. "Why not? We're pirates, you're marines. We both know we might wind up fighting one another some point in the future, and that you'll be making a report on me and my crew's abilities."

"Yes, I will. I have vows to keep, a duty to perform. But Hina also knows she owes you. You didn't have to save my crew or me after the Knock-Up Stream brought us up here. You didn't have to take us aboard. You didn't have to try to fight for my wounded or save my marines. You did all of that while saving this island from itself. You might act the pirate, but if there were more such like you, there would be no need for marines. Hina in debt," Hina replied bluntly.

"I don't want to be in the position where I will have to tell my superiors more about your crew than Hina already has to. So neither myself, nor my marines will look into whatever changes to the Resolve you are creating beyond any we will see while living on your main deck. There is such a thing as plausible deniability, after all. "

Luffy smirked back at her. "Good to know. And Hina, you're pretty awesome yourself. Well, for a marine."

Rolling her eyes, Hina looked away, trying but failing not to smile at his words.

On the third day after Luffy had begun to move, the ship was slowly refloated, the repairs completed.

By this point, Luffy had a goodly portion of his strength back, and it was well he had since he and Zoro both strained to pull the rocks up out of the river even with the locals helping. Mud was nasty stuff, and not even Luffy could gain enough purchase in the water itself to help lift the things.

When the second rock was removed, the river, thankfully, helped them along, shifting the last one in its sunken niche, so it was easier to move. By the time they had it out, the Resolve had already begun to rise in its stand, and Luffy shouted, "Robin, let it go!"

Robin had been standing by, dozens of hands waiting to undo the ropes and smash the stanchions holding the makeshift stand holding the Resolve up in the center of the water together. Now, she did so, several dozen hands thumping bung nails out of their holes, while others cut loose the mooring lines. Such was her coordination that the Resolve didn't even list as she did so.

The Resolve moved with the waves of the incoming water as the river filled up further, and when the river was back to its previous level, floated there, free once more as the anchor was lowered, holding it in place. Luffy led a cheer, and the others, who had all come down to see it, whopped in delight. The ship itself seemed to quiver with delight, straining at the anchor cable like an eager dog at his leash.

"Whoo-hoo!" Luffy clapped Zoro on the shoulder as they walked along the riverbank towards the others who were already boarding the ship, eager to look around and make certain there was no water coming in. "Now that is a sight for sore eyes. Not bad for a few days' work, huh?"

"Heh, nope. Damn, but the ship looks good too. I doubt even a real shipwright could have done any better."

"Eh, I wouldn't say that. It would probably depend on the shipwright in question. Shanks used to tell me stories about this guy named Old Tom, who built the Oro Jackson. I'm hoping we can find him, or someone related to him to go over the ship for us. I have to admit that originally I thought about just getting a new ship when we reached a place that specialized in shipbuilding. But the Resolve has served us so well, especially in the sea battles, and when we crushed those Hawkins pirates, I don't..." Luffy paused, scowling. "Well, I know it sounds stupid, but it feels as if the Resolve is another crewmember, you know."

"You're talking to a man who knows that some swords have souls, Luffy," Zoro drawled, patting the hilt of Wado Ichimonji and then Sandai Kitetsu. "It just depends on what kind of soul it develops."

Luffy blinked at that, something about what Zoro had just said reminding him of something else he had learned from Shanks. *Or was it Lucky Roo? Ben? Hmm...*

Before Luffy could explore that, his attention was diverted as Nami grabbed him from the side, hugging him tightly. This pressed her chest into his arm and ribs, causing Luffy to flush just a bit despite his self-control as she jabbered into his ear. "That is great, damn the Resolve doesn't look as if it was hurt at all!"

"That'd be the paint job, it covers up the scars," Luffy quipped, smirking into Nami's face from a few inches away. *She's been really touchy-feely since I started to be able to get myself around. Not that I am complaining really, but I just have to wonder why. And what Robin thinks about it too. We're kind of together right now, regardless of if we can show it to anyone.* "Still, I gotta admit, it looks good."

"It looks great! Come on, now that we're done with this, let's take it for a sail, the Chief needs us back at Shandora." Tugging at Luffy's arm, Nami pulled him to the plank leading up to the ship.

Laughing, Luffy let her tug him along, though he glanced to where Robin was already aboard the ship. She looked at him and then Nami, one eyebrow rising in inquiry. But she said nothing, simply moving off to the front of the ship. Luffy and the others, including Pagaya and the rest of the work crews joined them, and the ship slowly moved through into the segment of the ship that previously had been controlled by Gedatsu. It was the easiest slope down into the forest below the outer rim of Upper Yard.

From there, they slowly meandered their way around the large island on the original White River. Then Nami steered them onto the new offshoot, which led them down into the crater that held Shandora.

Luffy hadn't been there since he had started work on the ship and was surprised at how much work had been done in the city. It had been cleared of most of the vines and other small vegetation. Lots of the gold from the Arc Maxim had been melted back down and replaced, gleaming here and there in masks, small statues, and written out hieroglyphic signs on some of the larger buildings.

But sitting in prominence was the bell. It and its stand had been lowered down somehow by the lord of the Sky, who was wrapped around the ziggurat hissing in joy as the bell tolled out a joyful tune in front of the main square.

An actual tune this time rather than just the tolling of the lunch hour, accompanied by several Skypieans on local flutes and the howling of the wolves, who had started to show up around the city. It was a riotous, joyful sound, exulting at the end of the war and their people uniting in the return of Shandora, the sounding of the bell. And the end of the work on the Resolve and everything else around the city.

Nor was it alone in shouting that this was a time to party. A crowd of the locals cheered and shouted from every rooftop and there seemed to be a huge firepit dug to one side of the ziggurat where lots of different foods were roasting. Amid other local chefs stood Sanji, the only one of the crew who hadn't been with them earlier, overseeing things as he whooped and thrust his arm into the air at the sight of the Resolve repaired once more.

Even Hina and the marines were there. The wounded marines were all cheering just as lustily as everyone surrounded by a few of the wolves and dozens of the Skypieans. Hina, in contrast, was standing alone on a roof over the food, a series of small tables and Island Cloud lounge chairs. She locked eyes with Luffy as the ship dropped anchor, and the crew lowered the gangplank, connecting the ship to one of the larger buildings which had been designated as a landing point from the new river.

From the top of the ziggurat, the chieftain and newly named Leader (temporary title) of the People's United Upper Yard thrust out his hands to either side, a smile on his face that looked a little too wide to fit there. "Nearly two weeks ago, tyranny ended!" he shouted, eliciting silence from the crowd. "Tyranny was ended by the hands of friends unlooked-for, who came here on the wings of a dream, and who fought for us. Who suffered with us? We, all of us, have paid for this victory in the blood of our fellows and we have mourned. But now, now the mourning is done, it is time to celebrate surviving!"

The moment of silence ended once more as the cacophony started up and Luffy laughed. "Huh, is this going to be a trend, us having a party after every major adventure?"

"Wouldn't that be great!?" Chopper shouted, leaping up and down in place beside him. Makino, too was smiling, even though she was in a makeshift wheelchair still.

Luffy moved over to her and lifted her, wheelchair and all, moving to the plank. "Yeah, it would be. As for right now, the old guy's right, let's party!"

The moment they were on the street level, the pirates and workers with them were surrounded by the larger crowd. Chopper was hoisted up on several of the wounded Shandians' shoulders as they whooped and hollered, racing off to the dance floor.

Zoro found a mug of the wolf's brew in his hand and soon found himself up on the roof with Hina and a few other heavier drinkers. "Roronoa Zoro, I demand a rematch! Hina prideful!"

"You're on Marine Witch!"

"Nami-chwan, I have prepared perfectly sautéed and grilled Shark Steaks with honey glaze sauce! Please, try some!"

"Nami, I, um, I wanted to ask you about those, those underthings you let me try. There are a lot of women who are thinking of trying to make some for themselves."

Nami attempted to pull away from Sanji, but Conis and several other ladies of both tribes soon surrounded her, pulling her through the crowd. Luffy found himself on the dance floor, dancing around while holding Makino in the air wheelchair and all, besides Chopper and dozens of other locals as Laki, Pagaya and Robin were all pulled in different directions.

For her part, Laki started the party by dancing with Aisa by the giant snake. Somehow, and even now, no one could figure out how, Aisa and Cleo were able to talk almost like two people, and the former vicious snake was docile to the point of silliness. The snake was currently bopping her head to the music of the bell while kids of all ages clung to his whiskers flung this way and that yelling in joy.

But her simple happiness was short-lived, as a voice called out to her over the background noise. "Laki!"

Laki turned and found Wyper moving through the crowd. Like Laki, he was wearing a cutdown version of a cast on his wounded leg, though Wyper's was quite a bit larger, and a lot of his chest and shoulders were still marked with gauze from his close encounter with Enel.

"Wyper. You alright?" Laki asked solicitously. There had been a complication with one of the anesthetics that Chopper had used, an allergic reaction that had felled many of the Shandians. Wyper and several other Shandians had come down with something that Chopper described as resembling an ancient virus called the Yellow Fever. They had all survived it, but the seven of them had been downright miserable for the last few days.

"I'm fine. It was nasty, but thanks to the Tanuki figuring out what was wrong so quickly, I've been clear of that crap for two days. Now I'm just hungry and thirsty all the damn time. But I wanted to talk to you."

"Oh?" Laki looked at the man quizzically, then blinked as Wyper grabbed her hand, pulling her gently through the crowd. Wyper wasn't exactly touchy-feely, so this act surprised her enough she didn't argue.

He pulled her until the two of them had moved away from the party before stopping, turning to face her. "Laki, I...I made a promise to myself. Above and beyond the promises to our people, to the memory of our ancestors. I, Laki, I want to ask you to marry me."

Laki's confusion and surprise at Wyper's actions disappeared into a far greater sense of shock, one so great her face just could not convey it, although it did try, her jaw dropping into a gape-mouthed, wide-eyed, stare of utter confusion. "What?"

"I realize the two of us have had our differences in the past, and I won't gainsay your desire to fight as a Brave when we were fighting for our homeland," Wyper acknowledged. "But since that's over since the chieftain himself is the leader of both tribes now, I think well, settling down would be a good idea for both of us. And we have to think about the next generation of Braves too."

He went on in this vein for a few minutes, dropping the fact he loved her several times, never noticing that her eyelid had begun to twitch, or her hands start clenching as confusion gave way to anger. "You absolute MORON!" she howled suddenly, unable to restrain herself.

Wyper blinked, then paled as Laki seemed to grow in front of him, positively bursting with rage. "You complete, stupid ARGHHH!" With that shout, some of the anger seemed to leak out of her, like steam out of a teapot, leaving her more coherent, but no less angry. "How can we have been friends for so long, and you still have no idea about me!? I might have pined for you once Wyper, but that ended when you kept on trying to stop me from fighting with the other Warriors."

"Ye, yes, but that's over with for now. We don't need as many warriors any longer, so..." Wyper interrupted.

"SO what!?" Laki exploded again, the volume of her shout almost assaulting Laki like a physical force. "That doesn't mean I have forgiven you for that or want to turn around and become a wife. Not to you, not to anyone! I have never wanted that life, ever!" Laki once more rained in her anger, staring at the now shell-shocked Wyper, who looked as if his world view had just taken a hit.

And that nearly made her rage return all over again. The fact Wyper had tried to fit her into the mold of a normal woman not because he felt that was the right place for her, but because he was trying to protect her, infuriated her no end. But blowing up at Wyper further would serve no purpose, and Laki knew it. The man was as stubborn as the Vearth under their feet and just as slow to change his mind. So instead, she reined in her temper again, snarling out, "Don't ever talk to me about this again, Wyper. I'm not the woman you want me to be. I wish you luck on finding one, but that person just isn't me."

With that, Laki turned and left the shocked Wyper behind her, heading back to the party. Unfortunately, if she had expected that to be the end of it, Laki was sadly mistaken. By the time she got back, word somehow – Laki had to reluctantly blame it on her voice – had spread that she had rejected Wyper's proposal. Not the how of it, just the fact that something a lot of the unmarried men had thought was a certainty had not come to pass. Which, alas, meant Laki was, at least to the menfolk, on the market.

Soon after returning to the party, Laki found herself very popular among the unmarried men, who were smiling and waving at her wherever she went, plying her with drinks, talking about their new houses in Shandora, about the future, about the plans to reclaim and cultivate some of the jungle. Boring things, things they wouldn't talk about to a Warrior. Even the Chief got into it, broadly hinting in a laughing tone that a woman of her proven strength should pass on that strength to the next generation.

And every time, Laki became angrier, more desperate to escape. Finally, she could take it no longer, and escaped back out into the night, dancing through a band of wolves and out the other side.

OOOOOOO

How long the party lasted, Luffy had no idea, but it was deep in the night as the music and dancing finally ended. The eating was still going on, but the noise had died away. Luffy left Makino in Chopper's capable hands when she began to get tired, then moved through the party, nodding at the people he knew and slowly getting a little annoyed at the amount of backslapping he was getting. He spoke with the chieftain for some time, wondering how to politely comment on the fact he had no idea what the guy's name was, and coming up blank before the man walked off.

With a bit of work, Luffy removed himself to one of the rooftops overlooking the drinking contest going on. Fullbody and one of the other marines had fallen out, while Hina and Zoro were still going, each of them attempting to match the other drink for drink. Sanji had disappeared, as had Conis and several of the other local girls. Robin and Nami were also not to be found, but Robin was probably in a similar position somewhere else, not being a super party woman. Nami was a minor mystery, but Luffy figured that she was either with the wolves or with the kids.

Laying back with a plate of food and a single stein of ale, Luffy allowed himself to simply relax for a time. That was until Laki leaped up onto the roof from the back end in terms of where the party was happening as if the bats out of hell were after her. Seeing him, she seemed to pause, then sigh in relief and slump down next to him, grabbing up his beer and draining it without so much as a by your leave. "Um, you're welcome?"

"No, not yet, but I will be," Laki growled, her face flushed with some deep emotion Luffy realized, but not drunk.

"Okay, I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that you didn't just come up here to steal my beer before slapping me on the back and promising to name your children after me," Luffy answered slowly.

"Fucking hell no," Laki shuddered before bursting out with, "Wyper asked me to marry him."

"Congratulations...?" Luffy trailed off making the last word into a question. "Erm, I might change into a woman some of the time, but I don't speak your language, so I'll apologize if this is actually something you want. It just doesn't..."

"God, no! Ugh. He, okay at one point, I thought, well never mind, he ruined it. He wants me to be a traditional woman, to mind the tent, or house now, I guess, to stay at home and watch over our children! He's always wanted that but has never understood that it was never what I wanted!" The tall woman groaned, leaning back and thumping her head against the protective wall of the rooftop, the two of them were on at present.

"Worse is that everyone else seems to want the same thing!" Laki thumped her head back against the wall once more. "It wasn't just because I thought my place was with the braves fighting for our ancestry that I fought. Yes, I wanted to fight for our people, true, but also to have adventures in the first place! To give my ability to make weapons a proper outlet. I have **never** wanted to settle down. To have a husband, maybe. To have kids, no! But now that there's no need for my weapons, our home returned to us and peace with the Skypieans, now everyone is just assuming I will give up my life as a Warrior and become a traditional woman. It's so fucking frustrating I could just scream!"

Luffy nodded slowly, remembering a movie he had seen once about some heroes or whatever dismantling a bomb. That was the impression she was getting from Laki right now, and he didn't want to be at ground zero when she went off. Then a thought occurred to him, and he smiled. *Hmm...* "So, you could say that your dream was just to have adventures?"

"To have adventures, to prove a woman could be a warrior. And, when I was younger, to see the world beyond our tribe, to build weapons no one in this world has ever seen. We're so caught up in fighting to reclaim our past that we have neglected to think about our future, to wonder what is over the horizon," Laki replied, her voice passionate.

Knowing now why Laki was here, Luffy grinned. "Well, the Jolly Rodger and the ocean has always been an aid to those who want to run away. And it just so happens I'm in the market for a Gunner with a big enough dream..."

Laki's face became sly, all her earlier pent up anger and annoyance fading as she leaned forward, holding out her hand. "I think we understand one another. You've got yourself a Gunner captain. If that title means I get to play with weapons?"

"Heh, you get to play with weapons. And help fight the ship at range with those weapons, along with Robin." Luffy shook her hand, and the deal was made. "But I hate to ask, will your clan have trouble with your leaving?"

"Probably," Laki affirmed. "Given all the suitors I've suddenly developed, and how even the chief thought I should settle down and turn my mind elsewhere, I would say that they would try to stop me leaving."

Luffy grinned. "In that case, we're going to do this pirate style, and steal you away. Meet us at the Resolve just as the first light is seen on the horizon, and we'll get you, and ourselves, out of here before anyone is awake enough to argue the point."

Laki agreed to that with a laugh, but left soon after, saying she had to have a talk with Aisa, one she was, "Looking forward to about as much as I enjoyed Wyper's idea of a confession."

Wincing and wishing her luck, Luffy watched the woman go for a time before leaning back and picking up a drumstick, chewing on it. *Well, that went about as well as I could have expected.*

"So this is where you went, Luffy. What are you doing up here?"

Luffy looked to the side of the roof, watching as Nami pulled herself up the wall, landing adroitly on her feet as she smiled at him. "Recruiting actually. Laki sought me out. Turns out there's sort of a life everyone here seems to want to force Laki to live. She'll be joining us after she gives Aisa the bad news. I just hope the little girl doesn't convince Laki to take her with us. I don't know what Cleo's reaction to that would be."

"Not going to say that the ocean's no place for a child?" Nami teased, sitting beside him and leaning over to look down at him from above. This also gave Luffy a view down the top of her shirt, which showed that, for once, she had let her glorious orbs of flesh free to roam within the less confining spaces of her shirt.

Huh, my mind's waxing eloquent tonight. Must be the effect of the fruit punch. Damn, but I hope Sanji got the recipe out of the wolves. Even as he thought that Luffy couldn't tear his gaze away from Nami. Either her eyes, her lips, painted with a tiny bit of red or her swaying chest inside her shirt. The rounded curves visible like this led to further treasures within that threatened to drag Luffy's mind to places they shouldn't go. *Damn man, remember you've got Robin. Ya can't go pulling a Happosai and ogle every girl ya meet.*

"Erm, no," he replied after an indeterminate amount of time, during which Nami's lips twisted into a satisfied, and somewhat sexy, smirk. "I think your background and Robin's both would point to that being a lie. Although I don't doubt both of you are special cases in more ways than one."

"Hmm..." Nami had looked happy at first, then the mention of Robin had seemed to cause her to tense up. "Well, it's good to know that you understand that."

Abruptly she moved from leaning over Luffy to sitting on his legs, her hands propping her upper body up as she stared down at him. This put her short and panty-clad core practically directly over Luffy's crotch as she looked down at Luffy's face.

"Erm, what are you doing, Nami?" Luffy questioned, now pushing away the effects of the drink and through his own arousal, alarmed at where this could be going.

"Acting like a pirate." Nami waited until she saw Luffy's face furrow, then she swooped in, murmuring, "Taking what I want," against his lips.

A second later and they were kissing. For a brief, brief moment, Luffy reacted as any other man would have, kissing her back their lips pressing against one another, wringing a happy hum out of Nami. Then he regained control of himself, pushing Nami off him and to the side with one hand as he sat up. "What the heck Nami? If this is because I saved your life again with Enel, you know you..."

"No, it's not just that. I, I've been developing feelings for you since before you even freed me from Arlong. I started to think I might be in love with you after that. But I never, it was, emotions are hard darn it." Nami huffed, unhappy now looking back on her period of inaction. "I hadn't decided to make that last leap until up here on Skypiea."

With that, Nami wiggled back onto Luffy's lap before he could escape, locking her arms behind his back as she pressed her chest into his leaning in for a kiss. But this time, Luffy leaned back and then somehow took Nami with him as he did a handstand, using the muscles of his neck alone to flip himself to his feet so fast Nami didn't even have time to realize she had just been flipped before he tickled her side.

With a whoop Nami let go and Luffy took two quick steps back, staring at her. "Nami, I, a part of me is flattered, erm, a lot. But, while we've kept it secret, I'm kind of in a relationship already with..."

"Robin. I know. I saw you two go off together during the party with the wolves." Nami smirked saucily, twitching her hips this way and that as she moved towards Luffy, leaning forward to give Luffy a view down her shirt once more. "But if you're exclusive, Robin should have protected her place better. After all, why should a pirate be stopped by something like that?"

A flash of anger washed through Luffy at those words and he shoved her with one hand backward, glaring at Nami so much she stopped. "Are you listening to yourself?"

Nami paused and did so before flinching slightly, cursing her word choice to the deepest hells. "I, I'm not condoning anything like that!" she stuttered, before regaining some of her earlier momentum with an effort of will. "But you and Robin have only just started to date, right? So it's not like she's staked out a permanent claim. That means there's room for some... ambiguity."

"I'm not a thing to be fought over, Nami." *Not again! I am not letting that shit start in this life, no matter the reason.*

"That's not how I see you, Luffy!" Nami replied, now getting frustrated that her attempt at seduction had floundered, letting more of her emotions out. "I don't think I could control you or think I could dictate your actions or emotions, I wouldn't want to! I just want your heart to be mine, that's all."

"My heart is mine to give. And I won't betray Robin like that," Luffy answered, one hand moving in a cutting motion between them for emphasis. "I'm sorry Nami, but I'm not that kind of person."

Again, Nami paused then smirked that same saucy, incredibly sexy smirk as she grabbed his hand, pushing it to the side and stepping into Luffy's chest. "But you're not saying you're not attracted to me. I'll take that. I'll win your affections all for myself Luffy, you'll see."

"Wait, what? I just..." Luffy stopped speaking, stepping back quickly glaring at Nami. "None of that."

"None of that, **now**," Nami quipped.

"None of that ever!" Luffy growled out, again losing some of his self-control. When he went on, his voice came out in a hiss. "I am not trying to play with your emotions, not trying to lead you on, I'm not the kind of man who would do that. But I am in a relationship with Robin. **That's it.** I'm not going to set her aside, to be with you. Yes, you're sexy, yes, I like you. Yes, there could have been something between us before this, maybe. But I am not going to do that to Robin. And I do not like you trying to get between us or using your body to make my mind turn to mush."

He paused, staring at Nami who stiffened under that gaze, before the stunned and chagrined Nami nodded slowly, understanding his point. *Damn it Nami, why did you think this would work, don't you know what kind of man he is by this point? His rejection of Vivi should have told you that he'd never dump a girl like that!* The orange-haired woman castigated herself. *But no, you were so desperate to gain a lead on Robin for his affections, you forgot Luffy's actual personality. Damn it!*

As if in reply to her thoughts, Luffy went on. "Don't do something like this again Nami, I won't respond as nicely again." With that, Luffy turned and hopped off the roof, landing easily on the next one to the left, moving off and away.

Behind him, Nami slowly slumped to her rear as regret began to fill her. "I've screwed up by the numbers, haven't I?" she whispered, staring up at the uncaring moon far above.

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Robin had escaped the party at large rather quickly at one point, not being the type who enjoyed large goings-on with people who were the next best thing to complete strangers. She

had begun to search for Luffy for a time, using her powers, and had seen the moment when Nami attempted to take advantage of Luffy being alone. *I am going to have a 'talk' with that girl, but not right now. Let her stew in the failure of her direct approach. That is not going to be a fun conversation, but I rather like Nami, despite her sneak thief tendencies.*

Having tracked Luffy with little difficulty thanks to her powers, Robin found him in the crow's nest of the Resolve. Climbing up to the crow's nest, she found that it had been made into a small, circular sofa area thanks to a Sky Cloud being packed against the sides and bottom. There was even a tarp for when it rained that could be hung like a tent from the central flagpole.

The tarp was up at the moment, And Luffy's head popped over the side, watching as Robin climbed up to him. He winced, and looked ready to bolt, but didn't, an act of courage that won a smile from Robin's face. With that, Luffy was out of the crow's nest, scaling down into the rigging where he pulled her into his arms and leaped upwards.

As soon as they were there, Robin kissed Luffy, hard. She felt him stiffen but refused to let him end the kiss, following him as he tried to pull away until he fell back against the other side of the circular sofa set along the sides of the crow's nest. When he did, she sat beside him, still smiling. "Thank you for your loyalty Luffy."

"Gah... you, you saw that, huh?" Luffy scowled. "I'm really sorry about that. I thought that, that Nami flirting with me occasionally was just her way of acting, a leftover from her time as a cat burglar. Feels stupid to think that looking back on it. There always was a bit, well more to it when she flirted with me instead of Sanji. I guess I was, well, bit naïve, yeah?"

"Somewhat. Still, is it any wonder Nami fell for you, Luffy? You save her from a life as a virtual slave to Arlong, her sister and her town held above her head to enforce her cooperation. You promise to help her achieve her dream, then save her again here in Skypiea from Enel, a logia user who was practically invincible."

"Well hell, when you put it like that," Luffy pouted, though his lips twitched as Robin giggled, laying down next to him. She made no move to kiss him again, sensing this wasn't the time for that, just cuddling against him, feeling his heard thump faster and faster at her presence before slowly subsiding as his arms went around her, a sigh of deep contentment coming out of her mouth as she leaned against his chest.

Luffy really didn't want to, but he had to ask. "Erm, so, what should we do about Nami?"

Robin frowned, thinking. "My first inclination was to let her stew in her failure for a bit. I think that is still a good idea. And when I feel an appropriate time has passed, I will talk to her first. But tell me something: If you and I weren't together, how would you have reacted to Nami coming onto you so strongly?"

She felt Luffy wince and smiled faintly. "So, do you have feelings for her?"

"Not, not like you and I do," Luffy answered. "I mean, she's attractive, but that's only part of it. I honestly haven't really... it's complicated. I like a lot Nami's personality, but there are almost as many bits about how she thinks and acts that I don't like. And this whole episode sort of shows it. She's so, so automatically selfish if that makes sense. She feels sorry about it afterward, and I'll bet when you confront Nami she will apologize and mean it. But she still does it in the first place. She said it herself, she was willing to try and get between us as if what you and I have is something less than what she and I would have."

After parsing her way through that, Robin nodded regretfully. Robin was extremely happy with what they had, and would not give it up, even if neither of them had mentioned the word 'love' yet like Nami had. Yet from the moment Robin had joined the crew, it was obvious that Nami was developing feelings for their captain. And if Nami had thought about perhaps...sharing his affections, Robin would have been willing to see if they could share.

But her first move was to try and win the whole of Luffy's affections and to go around Robin while doing it. Robin wasn't going to have that. Not now. Not ever. They just clicked so well together, right from the moment she met Luffy in fact, that it sometimes almost scared her. *The word love might not have passed our lips, but what we feel... Thoughts for another time.*

"If she apologizes, perhaps there can be hope for her. But apologizing after being rejected, that is going to take a lot of moral fiber. I won't say it's impossible, but I would not accept anything less than a heartfelt apology. Though perhaps, if she had approached this differently, I would even have thought about sharing you."

Luffy blinked at that twitching his neck to look down at Robin incredulously. She giggled at his look and explained her reasoning, to which Luffy nodded slowly, thinking it through and showing the maturity that so often surprised her even now.

"I might not be willing to try that at this point. I just don't think sharing is in Nami," Luffy replied, with some regret. He did like Nami after all, and that feeling could have segued into a relationship pretty quickly. "Frankly, I think that ship has sailed."

Robin sighed and nodded, understanding his point. "We will just have to be careful to make certain it doesn't interfere with our crew's dynamics."

"True. But for now, can we just forget about this for a bit and cuddle. Who knows when we'll be able to get the time to do this again once everyone is aboard once more?" Luffy scowled, before going on more thoughtfully. "But afterward, after the marines are gone, I think we will need to admit our relationship to the crew. I think hiding it isn't the best thing for either of us going forward, and the longer we wait, the worse it will be."

"..." To this, Robin had no ready argument, and she nuzzled into his side and chest, staring up at the stars.

Several hours later, Luffy roused Robin before dawn broke. "We're leaving now. The Shandians are going to be very unhappy with us if we stay too long."

"What, why?" Robin grumbled even as Luffy slid over her.

There Luffy rested on top of her for a moment, his weight pressing down onto hers in a most pleasant manner before rolling to his feet. He then picked her up in a princess carry, leaping up out of the Crow's Nest and down, landing lightly on his feet. *Almost back to normal speed-wise, strength will take a while more. Ki healing for the win Enel, may your soul rot in hell!*

Once he had his feet under him, Luffy set Robin down in an Island Cloud couch set around the foremast. There were several of these scattered across the deck and down below now, Luffy having used the time repairing the ship to bring in as much of the stuff, and Cloud Dials, as possible. "You weren't watching me right before Nami showed up I take it? Laki has decided that she would prefer life at sea to becoming a housewife and the social pressure that she would face if she continued to refuse that role."

Robin's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Ah, yes, I can see that being an issue. Laki is considered a nontraditional woman, almost a pariah for her desire to fight as a warrior herself, so the social pressure to leave that behind will be large. But she is also rather famous and well-liked by many, and her ability with Dials will be in high demand if not for the weapons she so likes. We should indeed get going. I'll put a pot of coffee on, shall I?"

Nodding to that, Luffy left Robin there, moving back into Shandora to find his scattered crew. The first he found was Chopper and Makino. The little guy was dead to the world in Makino's lap, while she was slumped against the back of her wheelchair, who was snoring away herself.

Luffy woke her up with a gentle tap to the shoulder and a whisper of what they were on about. Makino hadn't had much time to get to know Laki or indeed anyone, but she understood Luffy had some kind of reasoning behind this move. "And another woman in the crew is always w, wel, welcome," she murmured, nearly biting her lip as the words came out in a stammer due to the electrical damage she had taken.

"Yeah, but more importantly, she'll be bringing a lot to the crew. Now, wake Chopper up and get the two of you to the Resolve.

Seeing Nami after the events a few hours ago was kind of awkward, but thankfully she had joined Hina and Zoro and had basically knocked herself out through drinking. Luffy decided

to wake up Zoro and Hina first and get Hina to lead the others back to the Resolve before waking up Nami, moving away from her quickly.

When she heard about Laki joining them, Hina tsked. "That sounds like a remarkably bad way of repaying their kindness. She is an important personage, despite the way most Shandians treat her. Hina concerned."

"Hence why we're sneaking away. And the Shandian's kindness? Ahem, who was it who nearly died so that Sky Island could be evacuated?" Luffy shot back. "Besides, it's what she wants. Thinking about what she'd face here, I can understand her desire to leave it all behind and chase her dreams elsewhere."

Faced with Luffy once more, Nami had almost missed this entire discussion, wallowing in guilt for her actions that night, and sadness at how Luffy was standing so far away from her. The easygoing closeness they had enjoyed was now in stark abeyance, and she found she missed it. But Laki's desire to leave and what she would face if she stayed made her nod in agreement. "Let's go," she rasped out, her voice affected by the amount she had drunk but otherwise lucid. "If Laki's got a dream and is running away from something, the pirate's life will be perfect for her."

That won a nod even from a surly Zoro, who had not won his second drinking match against Hina, the winner having been Nami despite the fact she had to play catchup. Seeing the united front of the pirates, Hina sighed and nodded before voicing her thoughts. "Hina annoyed. She would have made a great marine too."

That won a chuckle from the pirates, and the group split off. Nami led Zoro back to the Resolve with a single glance towards Luffy, who simply nodded at her, as if nothing had happened between them, before setting off to find Sanji. At the same time, Hina moved to find her crew.

Ironically, this eventually led the two captains to the same place: one of the ancient buildings that had been fully refurbished into a kind of simple housing area. They blinked at one another as they arrived at the door, then Hina spoke. "Fullbody is apparently here with a lady. You?"

"Sanji. Although, if they don't wake up fast enough, I'm not above sticking them both in the same bed before wakin' 'em up," Luffy drawled.

Hina was still chuckling at that when they found their two missing crewmen. Sanji was asleep in a bed with Conis. Fullbody was laid out on a sofa. And whereas Sanji was shirtless at the very least, Fullbody and the lady with him were still fully clothed.

The two captains looked at one another then played a quick game of rock-paper-scissors, which Luffy lost, having merely matched Hina's speed rather than try any tricks.

Smirking cheerily around her first cigarette of what promised to be another interesting day on the pirate ship, Hina moved deeper into the room. Once in the center of the room, Hina took a deep breath and then began.

"UP AND AT THEM MARINE!" Hina bellowed at her drill sergeant best, getting all four occupants to squeal and leap up. Fullbody stood at attention for a brief second before sagging while the woman rolled off onto the ground, where she curled up groaning and covering her head with her arms. Sanji and Conis were in much the same condition, covering their ears, then their heads and their stomachs, as if they were unsure which to address first.

They were also naked as jaybirds. The bed behind them also showed some evidence of their night together, including a small but noticeable bloodstain.

Hina's eyebrow rose in interest as this allowed quite a bit more of Sanji to be revealed than she had any desire to see previously. "Hmm... not bad. But not great. Hina has seen better."

"Damn it Sanji, I hope to fuck you used protection. The last thing I want is to enable you're leaving little Sanjis behind everywhere," Luffy growled, turning away rapidly from the naked couple.

That caused Sanji and Conis, who was also naked, to remember their state of undress. Conis shrieked and dove behind the bed while Sanji twirled in place, using centrifugal force to pull the sheets off the bed behind him onto his body. Whereupon Sanji fell flat on his face, the sheet having wrapped his legs to one another quite securely.

Luffy couldn't take it. He just about bit through his knuckle to keep from howling out in laughter, falling to his rear and rolling on the ground. Hina was made of sterner stuff. She was able to reach down and grab up a pillow from the floor and guffaw into it until she had it out of her system.

By the time they had themselves under control, Conis had pulled on a sheet and was looking at the two of them in confusion. "Um, Heso, captains. Wh, what did you want Sanji for might I ask?"

"And me, ma'am?" Fullbody interjected, helping the girl he had apparently slept with rather than **slept** with through the door behind the two unwelcome newcomers. Not that he was going to say anything, not with Hina looking at him so censoriously. *That is the last time I ever get drunk! I might have completely fouled up any chance I had with Captain Hina!*

Once more Luffy explained why they were leaving like this, watching as Conis scowled but did not seem overly surprised. She was clearly unhappy, but just as clearly had been prepared for Sanji leaving her, if not in this manner. Sanji too looked unenthusiastic, but willing to go along with things.

Soon they were all on the move once more, with the others leaving Conis and Sanji to say their farewells in private while also allowing Sanji some modicum of dignity as he dressed. Then the two of them were coming out of the room, both dressed.

"I'm coming with you," Conis explained. "You'll need a guide to get you to Cloud End and back down to the Blue Sea."

"Cloud End?" Hina and Luffy asked as one before Luffy shouted, "Jinx!" as he pointed at her.

Giggling at their antics, Conis explained as the five of them left the house quickly, moving towards the ship. "Cloud End is where you can get down to the Blue Sea fastest. Otherwise, you would have to try to find a far slower exit from the White Sea. From what I understand, that is near to impossible given the distances between islands up here. Most crews would starve before finding their way down."

"Ouch." Luffy grimaced. "Cloud End it is, and thank you."

The rest of the trip back to the Resolve was spent in silence, each of them lost in thought. The rest of the two crews had already arrived, to a ship that was different in many small ways to the Resolve they were used to.

"Laki was by earlier. She informed me she would meet us at Upper Yard's outer cliff-face. She's still talking things over with Aisa," Robin reported.

As Luffy answered in the affirmative, the marines, Chopper and Nami all looked around at the various changes large and small they could see. This wasn't nearly all of them, but not even the rest of his crew who hadn't helped build it knew that.

The main difference was in the masts and at the aft of the ship. They were slightly larger, their rigging slightly different. In between the sails were three man-sized poles, on which sat small circular globes around the size of a grown man's chest. These could be opened to show the extra-large Air Dial, three of the many that had been taken from the Arc Maxim. Around each of the three masts were small sitting areas made of Island cloud, matched by the five Island Cloud lounge chairs at the prow of the schooner-rigged vessel.

The aft deck had been changed quite a bit, though Nami's clementine trees were still there, having been transplanted by her and Luffy, the only work on the repairs she had helped. They had been spread out slightly now with the slightly enlarged aft deck the rest had which had been almost entirely replaced. The one set of stairs leading up to the aft deck had been replaced by a set to either side of the deck rather than one right by the doorway into the cabin. The doorway had been replaced by a more circular version marked by steel around the edges and a central glass porthole.

The number of portholes around the room had been shrunk, but the portholes themselves had been slightly enlarged. So much so they could each now be used to house swivel type three-pound cannons, though the pirates didn't have any of those just yet. The further back portion of the aft deck of the ship was marked now by a tiny chimney leading into a fully refurbished kitchen area that used dials, replacing the original mess-hall below. That had been converted, allowing each of the crew more space.

For all the changes on the deck and at the back of the ship, though, it was on the sides and underneath the waterline that the ship had been changed even more. But none of the marines, not even Hina, knew what was down there now. Hina suspected, but she was in no rush to prove those suspicions correct. Instead, she waited until after she and Luffy had gone through the same ritual as the last time she boarded the Resolve before lounging next to Robin and Makino, gratefully grabbing up a large mug of coffee.

"Navigator? You're up," Luffy prompted.

Looking at him, Nami once more saw that while there wasn't any reserve in his stance or look towards her, there wasn't any closeness either. *Still, that's probably the best I'm going to get at this point. I made my bed, I have to live with my actions.*

With a nod in Luffy's direction, Nami moved to the tiller and began to wrap out orders. A moment later, the Resolve's sails were opened and angled correctly to catch the wind as they were off once more, heading along the new branch of the White River and out to the White-White Sea.

The Resolve moved along the White River sedately for an hour or more, constrained by the limits of the river and the water's speed. But as the Resolve exited out into the White-White Sea, Nami instantly felt a difference. It moved faster, more responsively than it had before.

She rapped out commands to Luffy and the others handling the sails, feeling the ship nearly straining under her control, almost longing to get free. *Damn, it hasn't been this responsive since... ever really. What the heck did Luffy and the others do?* Nami had spent most of her time trying out various weapons designs with Laki, so she hadn't been involved in the repair project.

She wasn't the only one to notice. While the marines helping them didn't seem to notice anything unusual, Luffy and Zoro kept glancing at one another, one confused, the other thoughtful, as they worked with the rigging, finding the work far easier the knots coming under their fingers easily, the sails nearly turning themselves. All of it made Luffy try to remember something that Lucky Roo had told him once. *It was some old legend of the sea...*

But before he could bring it to mind, the group was hailed from the shoreline. "Ahoy!"

The marines and pirates turned in that direction and saw Cleo rearing out of the forest. On her head stood Aisa and Laki. As they watched, Laki hugged Aisa, then hopped off the giant snake's head, using her Skate dials to race towards the ship. Soon she was skating over the waters alongside the ship, calling up to Luffy. "Permission to come aboard and join your crew, Captain Monkey?"

Laughing at how absurd that sounded despite the formality of the moment, Luffy kicked a rope ladder over the side of the ship toward Laki. "Permission granted, new Gunner Laki. And never call me that again."

As Laki pulled herself over the side, Cleo and Aisa both were waving after their ship. Aisa was doing this by bouncing up and down on Cleo's head, waving her arms frantically, and Luffy could all too easily think she was crying too. Cleo was waving her tail and swaying her head from side to side, making happy hissing noises.

"All done with your farewells?" Robin asked, looking towards the young girl then to Laki. "I was honestly thinking we would find Aisa hiding away somewhere onboard."

"She thought about it, but Cleo talked her out of it, threatening to come after us," Laki answered, her tone deadpan. The others, even Hina, looked at her, and she shrugged. "No, I don't have any idea if she could swim through the ocean either, but that's what Aisa told me the snake told her. And yes, we talked about my leaving, for most of the night, in fact. Aisa really doesn't need me anymore, and she's always known about my love of adventure and dreams to see the world. So, with that and this whole thing with every man suddenly thinking I'm prime wife material, she understood why I was leaving."

"As for the rest?" Laki shrugged. "Given how of every single one of my friends only Kamakiri seems to have understood me at all, I decided to leave a note with him. Well, he was the only one not to try and 'court' me this past night anyway, and I know he's sweat on another girl too. Working on that note took me the rest of the night, but it said everything I wanted it to, repeating what I told Wyper and how much I was furious at them all, including the chief for their attempts to push me into that kind of mold."

Indeed, looking at her the others could see that the Shandian woman had bags under her eyes. She was also alternating between looking longingly at one of the sofas and in confusion at Conis and Pagaya. "Are you two joining us too?"

"I'm afraid not," Conis answered with real regret in her voice as she glanced across at Sanji. "My father and I are just acting as guides to Cloud End."

She sounded only somewhat regretfully Luffy was pleased to note. It seemed that despite last night, Conis had never been working under any delusions about her relationship with Sanji. *Gonna have to give my cook some respect for that.*

"Probably for the best. I've never been to Cloud End. Good Grief, I've never been down to the White Sea at all." As tired as she was, Laki also looked extremely excited at this, the start of her adventure.

The girls all gathered by the wheel with Nami at that point, asking Laki about Wyper, and everything that had happened with him in more depth than she had shared with Luffy. For his part, Luffy sat on the prow of the ship, smiling as he felt it race on, a true predator of the seas, fast and agile, shifting this way and that but keeping on course with a sweetness that had to be seen to be believed. *Those underwater wavers connected to the rudder are amazing! They add to the responsiveness so much it's crazy. Not the straight speed, but still, it's incredibly good.*

By the time the sun was in the sky above them, the ship had begun to see a small series of buildings still standing at the far edge of the White-White Sea. They consisted of four small buildings set two to a side of a single building over a small tunnel leading to the other side, which could not be seen from here. On this side of the tunnel were two docks, one to either side and a sign over the tunnel denoting the place's name.

Conis and her father hopped off the side of the ship lightly, landing on the docks racing along beside the ship shouting their farewells as the ship moved between the two ports towards the tunnel, slowing down as the sails were furled on Pagaya's instructions. "Really, we cannot thank you enough, Luffy, everyone! For all that you have done for us, we will all of us be forever grateful!"

Luffy laughed. "Heh, I don't know if ya can speak for Wyper or Aisa, but thanks for the sentiment Conis!"

"Hope your new business works out for you!" Nami shouted, waving her hand in the air to the other girl.

"Do watch over young Aisa, please. The girl is far too mature in a lot of ways and far too childish in others," Laki yelled out.

The others also shouted their own farewells save Sanji, who had moved to the back of the ship to look at Conis all the while as the ship slowly started to pick up speed thanks to a faster current underneath their keel. "Farewell, mademoiselle! Our time together was as heavenly as your appearance has always been angelic. I will treasure the memory of our time together for the rest of my days!"

Conis smiled tremulously as she slid to a halt. "I, I will, too, Sanji. Thank you for the night, and for everything else. I, if you ever come back this way, I will be happy to see you again!"

Twitching slightly at the tone of the two lover's words – no father liked to hear about such things involving his daughter – Pagaya also stopped on the inside side of the tunnel. "I'm sorry, everyone, but you should prepare yourselves for the drop!"

"Drop?" Luffy asked, an expression of confusion that everyone else aboard the ship copied, right up until it became a rhetorical question. The instant the ship left the short tunnel behind, the Resolve found itself sailing off the side of the Island Cloud that was built up underneath everything else in the White-White Sea.

Luffy had a brief instant to wonder which of the marines was cursing like a whole crew before they were in freefall. At which point, Nami and Zoro's cursing all joined the preexisting tumult while Sanji was too busy clinging to the side of the aft railing to do anything but attempt to get his eyeballs to pop back into his head.

To one side of him, Hina reacted instantly, clamping herself down with her handcuff powers and then lashing out with her arms in either direction, creating a long series of chains. Her marines were either caught within the chain's links or grabbed on quickly. "Hina unpleased, very unpleased!" She growled before headbutting backward, smashing Fullbody loose from where he had been attempting to use the distraction to get in a good grope, clinging to her from behind.

Luffy bounced off the lower side of the mizzenmast, flipping himself up and to the top of the Crow's Nest as he wondered if he should try somehow to get underneath the ship and try to slow it down or just evacuate everyone. A hand flashed out, grabbing Chopper as he somehow had found himself in midair moving upwards, tossing the little Zoan into the crow's nest.

Laki was also able to deal with the sudden weightlessness, using her Dial Skates to move through the air and back to the main deck, where she grabbed at a few of Robin's hands as she used her powers to keep herself, Nami and Zoro from following their captain in much less controlled circumstances.

In the crow's nest, Chopper recovered quickly from the fall, holding his hands over his ears for some reason. "What the heck!? Who is blowing on that whistle!"

Nami clung to the wheel, twitching herself around. "Sanji, why did your girlfriend just try to..."

The pirate Captain's voice trailed off as a giant octopus burst out of the Island cloud to one side, having moved through it as easily as a bird would through a normal cloud. It extended its arms, grabbing at the ship from the side, then pulling so that its body was directly above the ship, where it expanded like a balloon.

"What the heck!?" Luffy growled, staring up at the pink and purple giant octopus that was now slowing their descent something fierce. "Chopper, can you speak to him or her?"

"Him', but yes, I can do that." With Chopper's help Luffy, Hina and their crews learned that the creature was a Balloon Octopus, who, in return for the Skypieans feeding them, would willingly traverse the distance between the White-White Sea and the Grand Line far below. The species mated down in the Grand Line but lived and had children up in the Island cloud, some of which each Balloon Octopus ate routinely, giving them a surprising amount of elasticity and internal air reserves to call on.

"Well... you told me you wanted adventure, Laki. I'd say that was an interesting start to our next voyage," Luffy laughed, shaking his head with delight as he stared up at the Balloon Octopus. Inside, he was repeating a thought he had several times before, *Damn, but I love the Grand Line*, while the rest of the pirates cheered, and the marines, even Hina, wondered how fast they could get off this crazy ship. All the while, the Resolve drifted slowly towards the distant blue, green and gray ocean.

End Chapter