

I am not named Oda or Rumiko.

A brief note: I try to differentiate by how people address Enel in this chapter. The Shandians call him Kami. Raffy and co. call him God. The Skypieans call him Kami-sama. This is because of the difference in tone and reverence, each show when using that title/name/term. I hope it works without becoming too confusing.

This has been edited by Tomon and myself. Hiryu will have it soon and it will be updated afterward, but none of us are small mistake guys, so there will be more small mistakes than normal, but not as many as there might have been thanks to Tomon's efforts.

Chapter 17: Lies, the Direct Approach, and Lurking

At the same time that Nami and Makino were flying away from where they had just seen someone be executed through a lightning blast larger than most houses, on the other side of the island a little girl was making her own getaway. She was a tiny thing, about 12 perhaps, but short for that, with hair of a dark brown-purple color, small wings, and wearing a smock of multiple colors, just like the headband she wore. All of it was dirty at present but looked well cared for.

She smirked to herself holding her bag as if it was the most precious thing in the world as she crawled onto her tiny Waver. She waited a few seconds as lightning ripped the distant sky before she activated the engine, and slowly, silently made her way away from Upper Yard. "Until next time, our ancient home," she whispered, her voice lost in the wind.

She kept on moving as slowly as she could until she was well away from the island, then as if at some unseen signal quickly changed direction and speed. She did this several times before she made for an out of the way portion of Island Cloud set well away from the Holy Land or Angel Island. This example of cloud mixed with the gaseous version of Seastone, which was the basis for every island in the White Sea, looked as if it was completely uninhabited. There were no buildings, no sign of habitation, not even any animals.

There she hid her little Waver underneath a fold of the land, tying it down securely there and patting it affectionately before making her way deeper into the island's interior. Then, at a spot that had nothing to mark it out from any other on the island the little girl stopped. She looked around, then, certain she was being unobserved, reached down, her hand plunging into the Island Cloud. As she pulled her hand up, she brought with it a portion of the cloud, which was revealed to be a cutout false top, hiding beneath it a long tunnel leading down into the interior of the Island Cloud.

She hopped down it, uncaring of the danger of the landing, and rolled as she landed, grinning as she did. She then raced away, only to be stopped by a loud voice. "And where've you been?"

She turned in the direction of the voice, frowning angrily at having been found out. "Gah, Kamakiri!" she grunted, backing away as she put her arms protectively over her bag.

"You went off by yourself and tried to steal some vearth again didn't you? You're not supposed to be away from the village, and you know it, Aisa," the so-named Kamakiri went on.

He was a decently tall young man with sun-tanned skin and a short mohawk hairstyle with round sunglasses that had red lenses. He also had two big and colored earrings hanging from his ears. He wore a kilt of leaves and had a long skateboard next to him along with a spear and the hilt of a sword at his belt minus the blade for some reason, with a shawl of dark pink feathers around his shoulders. Aisa knew he had taken it from a bird in the Holy Land during a battle there.

Aisa rolled her eyes. "As if anyone could sneak up on me! In fact," she said somewhat smugly, "I think I've discovered something you all should hear."

That threw Kamakiri off, since normally at this point Aisa would mouth off and then run away, ignoring the fact that her statement was patently false. After all, hadn't his presence just surprised her? For all the power of her Mantra, Aisa's ability to understand what it was telling her was often quite poor, especially, for some reason, closer to her own position.

But he rolled with it, putting down his carving dagger and gesturing into the small village about a minute's walk from the entrance. "Right now? With your Mantra, you can surely tell that Wyper is not exactly happy with the world right now, or as close to it as he ever comes. Even if I did just surprise you..."

Aisa stuck her tongue out at Kamakiri and blew a raspberry at him for a second for that comment, but then her insouciance faded as she stared in the same direction, gulping. "Yeah, that's scary, scarier than Kami for certain. But..." she visibly steeled herself before going on. "I think they need to know what I felt up there."

The man snorted, but then smiled in approval at the little girl's courage, gesturing her to follow him. The two of them made their way through the village, with Aisa waving at a few of the older people, who simply nodded in her direction. Her smile brightened widely however as she saw people around the main tent, a tent shared by the village's war leader, Wyper, and the village chief. Spotting someone there, she raced ahead of Kamakiri waving one hand above her head. "Laki!"

The woman who turned toward Aisa at the call was a tall, black-haired woman, with her hair done in a long and elaborate ponytail at the back and two large bangs to either side of her

face, framing dark green eyes. Her lips shone with pink lipstick, something she had actually created on her own from various pigments. Like all the tribesmen around them, she had two small wings on her back and wore a light purple tunic that showed a decent amount of cleavage, enough to scandalize most of the women of the tribe, something that Aisa knew Laki did on purpose. The fact her tunic also exposed her stomach made it worse in many of the old women's eyes. She wore light-red pants open to either side of her legs.

Laki smiled at Aisa before twitching her head and frowning. "And where have you been, Nuisance? I saw you weren't in the village earlier. Did you sneak off to try to steal some vearth again? One of these days your Mantra's going to fail you, you know."

"She didn't just try," Kamakiri interjected, chuckling while ruffling Aisa's hair roughly. "She actually did steal away some vearth."

"Yep!" Aisa said, throwing her chest out and her shoulders back. Not that this actually did anything. "I'm a proud warrior of our people too!"

"A warrior does not fight for the dirt of vearth, a warrior fights to reclaim our homeland! A warrior of Shandia is not sustained by these little trinkets, but by the desire to take back what is ours!" roared a voice from inside the tent.

Aisa quailed but didn't run away, staring at the tent flap as it opened. The man revealed was taller and wider than Kamakiri and more tanned as well, with a black mohawk, dark intense eyes, and a cigarette clenched between angry teeth. His was the face of someone who was made to hate, be angry and that was indeed the case. This was the warrior Wyper, the village war chief, the man who had inherited not only the blood but also the will of the great warrior Kalgara.

He glared down at the little girl and her pouch, reaching down and grabbing it out of her hand despite Aisa's protests. The circle-tattoos around his left eye intensifying the glare. He stared inside it then poured the dirt that had been inside out to one side, scuffing it up with his boot. "Is this what you break the village rules for? Is this what you think we fight for? The dirt under our feet?"

"No!" Aisa shouted, trembling a little. "But, it was all I could carry away."

"So then are we bandits, to only care about what we can have in our hands?" Wyper shouted angrily at her.

"Calm down Wiper!" shouted Laki and the woman warrior got in his face, glaring at him. "She's a child still. Let the young ones take what comfort they can. Besides, Aisa shows courage enough to even think of going up there on her own. That kind of thing should be encouraged."

"You do her no good by coddling her, Laki!" Wiper growled. "Weakness like her love of Vearth. We don't need it. If you can't understand that, perhaps you should remain in the village and take up a woman's real work?"

Laki was the only woman warrior in the tribe, and indeed was the first one in many centuries, if ever. She disdained women's work and had thrown herself into training with the other young braves who had grown to be the strongest in the village, earning her place among them. Indeed, she did so without many of the weapons she herself had designed, making a point of using a simple rifle and the Waver skates that were the normal weapons of a Shandian warrior.

However, of late Wyper had begun to push her to stop trying to be a warrior. Some thought this was because he held more than friendly feelings towards her, but Laki had pushed back against the very idea hard, refusing to be pigeon-holed like that.

"Oh, we don't need hope? Do you think we all eat rage and anger like you? Then I suppose when you next break your Burn Bazooka you can fix it with your glare too," Laki shot back.

On top of Wyper's issue with her continuing to be a warrior, the two of them had been having this kind of fight for several years now. Wyper was all about attacking and continuing to attack as often as possible, believing in doing so they could wear Kami and his Priests down. But Laki thought that was stupid, and they needed new ways of attack somehow, which was why she had first started to design new weapons. By this point many of the elite of the village used them such as Kamakiri's burning blade, Wyper's Burn Bazooka and others, using up a lot of the village's supply of the Blue Sea material called iron. She felt they should wait until they had enough similar weapons to just overwhelm the priests' use of the mysterious ability, Mantra.

Laki's words had never gotten through to Wyper or his warriors. They disdained her words as much as they loved the weapons she had created for them. They thought that if a warrior needed to wait to have a better weapon before fighting, they were not warrior enough to win on their own merits. Wyper, in particular, refused to wait a moment longer than necessary to free the home of their ancestors. In return, she fought with the bare minimum to prove her worth to them and never backed down from a fight despite being the only female warrior in the tribe.

The two of them glared at one another and would've kept it up for a while if not for another man coming out and putting his body between them. He was a muscular man who wore a green jacket open at the front coupled with, for some reason, the upper-half of his face covered by a hat. Like the other warriors, he wore a grass skirt, but his was decorated with a red sash around his waist. He also had a pair of gloves on his hands taken from a dead Skypiean a few years ago. "Enough of this, Wyper. Laki is an honored warrior of the Tribe, you insult her by such words. And Laki, you have to admit Wyper's right. The hunt for vearth has killed

several of us. Just because Aisa's got Mantra isn't any reason to think she couldn't be caught out if the priests really try to."

That man was followed by another man, this one was far older, with a long bristly beard, and a full headdress on his crooked back. "Braham is right, we do no one any good sniping at one another like this. Besides," he said, turning a kindly smile on Aisa. "Aisa would not be here in front of this tent now if she didn't have something important to say."

At that Laki nodded, moving over to the little girl and kneeling beside her, throwing an arm around her shoulder companionably. "Well nuisance, what did your Mantra tell you? Is there anything interesting going on up top?"

Wyper and the other warriors scoffed, but didn't say anything, also looking down at the little girl. It was well known that Aisa's use of Mantra had begun at her birth and had only grown since. And as she was the only Shandian who could use it, she was something of a village treasure, which was why Wyper and Kamakiri had come down on her so hard.

Aisa smiled up at them, all of her initial courage racing back into her now, as she reported. "Well first, a few of the prisoners that we know the Kami and his soldiers took from the last Blue Sea ship to arrive here tried to make a break for it." There were several scoffs at that, and she went on hurriedly. "None of them made it, but one of them actually got to the edge of the holy land, and Kami Enel blasted him personally."

"So Kami deigned to notice mere slaves? I suppose that just means that his soldiers are growing incompetent! Good, that will make tonight's raid all the easier," Wyper said, but he still was staring at the girl. "But that's not enough to force you to come to the big tent. What else?"

Aisa gulped, staring at the wounds on Wyper, remembering how yesterday he had come back from his self-imposed patrol on the White-White Sea banged up and angry after an encounter with some Blue Sea dwellers who had somehow chased him off. *This isn't going to go over well* she thought. *Maybe I should've thought about this more. But no, the village has to know!*

"There's, there are a lot of Blue Sea dwellers up there now too. I could barely feel them at the edge of my Mantra, but there are at least forty of them, maybe more. And some of them, some of them are strong!"

"Explain that," Wyper said, crossing his arms, even as he bit down hard on the smoking route in his mouth. "What do you mean strong? How can you tell? Your Mantra can't work like that."

"It, it kind of can for the strongest people. When you are angry, or um... you..." Aisa said which caused Laki to burst into laughter. "I can feel wherever you are far better than I can

someone like Miss Martha, or well, the village chief. Sorry chief," Aisa said looking at the village chief, shrugging her shoulders.

He simply laughed, waving it off as if it was no concern, which to him it was. He well knew that Wyper was stronger than him, in many ways. That was why he had pinned the hopes of the Great Warrior Kalgara on him. "Go on."

"Well, I think there are three or four really strong ones among the Blue Sea dwellers. At, at least I think that's what my Mantra is trying to tell me, they kind of, kind of glow in my Mantra, like, like they are bigger than normal people only not? It's hard to describe. But I felt two other Blue Sea dwellers trying to get to the holy land," she went on, hurriedly knowing this was not going to sound good. Indeed, the second those words were out of her mouth Wyper roared out in anger, slamming his foot down on the reinforced trigger of his Burn bazooka, while the other warriors muttered angrily.

"They left quickly," Aisa went on, shaking her head. "I mean they were near to where Kami killed that other Blue Sea dweller and they ran away."

"Maybe they'll actually heed our warnings now and leave quickly. We don't need that kind of complication," Braham said, frowning.

Laki shrugged ignorance and uncaring in one. *Although I'd love to raid their ship for parts, maybe. Something to think about.*

"Complication!" Wyper sneer. "We don't need another set of enemies!"

"I don't think they'll run," Aisa said courageously quelling only slightly as Wyper turned to glare at her. "Those two, they weren't strong, at least from what I could tell. But the others, they're strong. I don't think they'll run," she said again.

"Thank you for the report young warrior," the village chief said before anyone else could speak. "However, you know that you broke the rules in leaving the village alone. You're going to have to be punished for that."

Aisa scowled but nodded. She probably could have gotten in and out of the village without anyone the wiser, if she had put off this trip another day or so, but she hadn't wanted to. She had sensed something at the edge of her Mantra, which had turned out to be the Blue Sea dwellers, and it had roused her curiosity enough to get her out of the village earlier than she had initially planned.

She was still curious about them, and why a few of them seemed to almost glow in her Mantra with power. It was odd and was only something she had ever seen before in Kami at one point when she got close enough to him to sense him directly. That had been more than enough though, and Aisa had never tried to sense Kami again.

Wyper frowned, staring at the little girl. "These Blue Sea dwellers don't matter," he said shaking his head angrily. "If they come at us, we'll fight them, if they appear on our lands, we'll fight them. They get in our way, we'll fight them. But they're not our priority. Our priority is Kami and his followers! And if they're willing to kill off prisoners who tried to escape, that might mean that whatever they have been preparing for his near completion. I don't think anyone here wants that, do we?"

All the warriors around him nodded, including Laki who had first thought up that theory. There had to be a reason why Kami was so interested in taking prisoners, and where were the old Kami's Enforcers? None of them had been seen since the new Kami had taken over nine years ago. So where were they?

And, more importantly to the Shandians, why were the Four Priests of the new Kami so furious in their defense of the whole of Upper Yard, the Shandians rightful homeland? Before the new Kami's had taken over some years ago, the Shandians had routinely clashed throughout Upper Yard with the old Kami's forces. Now they barely could make it a few miles inland before being halted and then forced to retreat without making any headway. Laki felt they were being put to work somewhere, doing something for the Kami, though she had no more idea what it could be than anyone else.

Despite that and her help in building weapons, Wyper was still of two minds about having a woman warrior. Setting aside his own feelings about Laki, there was no doubting her skill, but it did go against all tradition. Then again, Laki's very existence was a bit beyond the bounds of tradition given her father had been a Blue Sea dweller who had a one-night stand with her mother. The fact the woman had a one-night stand was one thing, the fact she had carried Laki to term had been another and had stained her in the eyes of the tribe for quite a while.

"Good," Wyper said, putting that thought aside now. "In that case, I want every brave within the tribe ready to go, we attack tonight."

Laki scoffed, shaking her head and looking away. She had long ago learned that trying to talk Wyper out of something was next to impossible and this attack wasn't going to be any different. It's not going to be different in that and it isn't going to be different in how pointless it is. Unless something new is added, the priests and we are going to stay locked in the stalemate! I thought the weapons I made might break the stalemate, but they haven't yet, and Wyper and the others refuse to wait until I figure out more.

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At the same time that the little girl was having her audience with the warriors, Makino and Nami were making their way over the White-White Sea back to their friends. After a few minutes of silence, Makino spoke up from where she was holding onto Nami's back and waist, her head pressed into the back of the other girl's. "Well, that was monstrously scary."

"You can say that again," Nami said with a shudder that Makino felt through her body.

"Well, that was monstrously scary," Makino said, and she could feel Nami roll her eyes before the orange-haired girl turned to glare at her. "What? It wasn't exactly the scariest thing I've ever seen. It was... just up there, that's all."

"Do you not have any fear whatsoever?" she asked.

Makino blinked at her, "Nami, I'm a jilted woman, jilted by a pirate who later turned out to be Red Hair Shanks, one of the Four Yonko. While everyone else would have stopped and let it go as simply a bad business, I came out onto the high seas with Luffy as my captain. What part of this tells you that I have any issue with being courageous?"

To this comment, Nami again rolled her eyes but still smiled. There was just something about the other woman when talking about Shanks that amused her. And that was added to the solid, dependable presence that Makino seemed to put out.

Then she shook her head, turning back to watch the way they had come. Makino noticed in amusement that Nami had still been piloting them forward with seemingly little effort while her head had been turned. *So much for the Waver being difficult for most people to use.*

The two women fell silent for a time as they zoomed on over the crystal-clear water. "So much for this place being a paradise," Nami said, breaking the silence this time. "Now, how to figure out how to convince Luffy to not get involved in whatever this is."

"You'd have to offer him more adventure than whatever is going on here, and I don't see that happening," Makino quipped, shaking her head. Even so, she was a little worried about what she'd just seen too even with her faith in Luffy's strength and the abilities of their crew.

For now, she put that aside, leaning in to whisper in Nami's ear. "So, I think we were talking about our captain earlier, and certain... feelings you might have for him, hmm~?"

Nami twitched in her arms and she revved the Breath Dial engine loudly. "What was that I can't hear you!"

"Don't try to play that game with me Nami, I've seen the looks you shoot him sometimes, come on, you can tell me. Are you crushing on our captain, do you just like his

body or is it something deeper?" Makino cajoled, only to be nearly thrown off the Waver despite her arms around Nami's waist as the girl twisted them nearly on to their side.

"I am not talking about this," Nami replied sternly. "Drop it, Makino."

"Humph, fine, but you're going to have to open up to someone eventually, or are you really happy to just look at him from afar as it were?" Makino retorted, to which Nami said nothing, causing the older woman to shake her head.

For as soft and squishy as Nami was physically, she was a porcupine emotionally. And, to be fair, I have to wonder if Nami has missed the boat anyway. It really did look like Robin and Luffy had been on a date back in Mock Town. That is a little weird to me given their age difference, but then again, they have been flirting on and off, since Robin first joined the crew after Cactus Island. And while Robin is older, Luffy might need someone mature and calm to offset his wilder nature.

Makino was still thinking about the possible love triangle cropping up among the crew when they zoomed in towards the beach, but as they did, both women noticed that some things had changed. First, Hina was no longer dressed in her bikini, she had instead dressed up once more in her normal marine officer's garb.

Second, Nami saw several prisoners lined up to one side in chains, their small white wings signaling they were locals and there several dozen wounded marines being seen to by Chopper. Zoro sat nearby leaning against a tree, while Robin and Luffy were, once more, laid out on two lounge chairs, sunning themselves as Sanji moved from serving them and, apparently doing Hina's bidding.

"What the hell happened here?" Nami shouted as they rode up the shoreline. She hopped off the Waver, stomping over to loom over Luffy, who looked up at her, one eyebrow rising to become visible from behind the sunglasses she was wearing. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is around here, and you go and start a fight with the locals!"

"Why the heck are you just assuming it was me?" Luffy asked, attempting to look affronted, which didn't work very well with this audience. "Fine, normally yeah you'd be right, but this time I didn't do it."

Nami almost gawked at him, then looked around at the others who were nodding and pointing to the Marines and Hina in particular. Hina huffed, glaring at the younger girl with her arms crossed. "Well, are you going to try to browbeat Hina for protecting my crew from the local's slandering us? Hina unrepentant."

At that Nami grumbled but said nothing, shaking her head and turning back to her crew. "What happened?"

"I'll note she didn't take you up on your challenge Hina," Luffy said with a chuckle.

"It shows much wisdom from one so young... and breakable," Hina replied in a droll tone.

But Luffy had already turned to Makino, cocking an eyebrow at her, silently asking the older woman why Nami seemed to be in a mood. "You were saying?"

The older woman related the tale from start to finish, with Luffy beginning to grin, as wide as his face could allow. Wider even than his facial muscles should. I see, so, a land where you really, really can't go, fascinating! We're going there right now. As soon as possible"

"Oh hell no! Bad Luffy," Nami said, moving over and smacking the redhead on the nose with her fingers. "This is not the kind of adventure I want to be a part of!

"Too late," Luffy said with a laugh. "What part about pirates is vague?" *Hmm, I wonder I could make that our catchphrase or something? Although, given how few actual pirate acts we have done, it might not be the best one I can come up with.*

Zoro chuckled, while Sanji looked as if he was somewhat of the same mind as Nami. Although if that was because he actually agreed with her, or because he wanted to look good in front of her, Luffy couldn't tell. "I agree with the captain. This kind of exploration sounds like a lot of fun, and frankly, while Conis and her old man are decent enough, the rest of the locals we've met have been assholes. Anything that gets up their noses is something I'm in favor of, for certain."

"Let's put it to a vote, who here doesn't want to do this thing that no one in their right mind would want to do because no one here is that freaking stupid!" Nami said raising her hand.

It took a moment for most of the others to work out what she had just said, before Sanji raised his hand, although he looked torn. "Chopper, you're supposed to be on my side!" Nami said, pouting, then looking at Makino who shrugged her shoulders.

"What side is that?" Chopper asked, even as he was trying to work out what Nami had just said.

"The sensible squad!" Nami said.

"But isn't Robin also sensible, and she didn't vote that way, right? Er, I, I'm kind of scared about this unknown land and our breaking the local taboo, but um, well, I, I don't want to, to let my fear's vote for me. So I'll abstain." With that, Chopper turned back to his current patient, finishing up working on his broken elbow.

"And it wouldn't have mattered anyway. My crew, I'm the captain. What I say goes. And if I think this sounds like a lot of fun, that's it, we go. You can try to persuade me, you can argue against it, but the final decision's mine," Luffy said firmly, crossing her arms under her chest even as she stayed where she had been since Nami and Makino returned, laid out on the lounge chair.

"Indeed, this sounds fascinating, and I am all for exploring unknown territory," Robin said, even as she sent a smirk Luffy's way, who uncrossed her arms and let one hand smack against the outside of Robin's hand, which caused Robin's hand to twitch slightly in response. It was subtle but that was fine by them.

Nami scowled, shaking her head angrily at Luffy's words. She knew the aqua-transsexual was right, but she hated the fact he was seemingly being so cavalier with their lives. Although Makino had calmed her down somewhat, Nami's sense of self-preservation, which had always been greater than the majority of the other people in the crew, was telling her that getting further involved in Skypiea was a bad idea. "W, Well I'm not going! Chopper, Sanji and I can stay here, and the rest of you can go off and get yourselves killed," she said huffily.

"You want to stay with the Marines then?" Makino asked. "I would rather not enter this forbidden land either if it meant running into more attacks like what wiped out that seaman earlier, but I think we'll be safer with the crew than without.

Hina smirked from where she had been watching all this, and now having heard her crew mentions she moved forward to join the discussion. "Hina has decided that she will try to talk to the locals again. If she can get them convinced that the Marines are who we say we are, officers of the law down on the Blue Sea as they put it and hand over our prisoners, perhaps we can get a ship that will be able to take us back down. Hina hopeful."

Luffy shrugged as she stood up, cracking her neck, shoulders and arms, smiling happily at the idea of a new adventure. "Maybe, and if you want to try, that's up to you. Your crew, your rules after all. Even if you are a Marine. But my crew and I are heading out."

She frowned for a moment looking at Nami's rebellious expression and sighed. "Sanji, you stay with Nami here and the Marines. Our agreement lasts until my entire crew has left yours behind and we are all down to the Blue Sea Hina," he reminded the pink-haired marine. "Which means these two should be safe from you as you all were from us, right?"

Hina scoffed waving her hand. "As if Hina has any interest in small fry."

"Excuse me!?" Sanji growled out, his ego fighting his code of chivalry. "Those are hurtful words Hina-chwan, and I'll have you know while my bounty might not be much now... and, and my picture a poorly made drawing instead of a picture that does my handsomeness justice, one day I will make it big!"

"Bah, you'll always be small fry love cook. You spend too much time flirting to be anything else, number three," Zoro said, eluding to the fact that Sanji's bounty was the third largest on the crew, and that by only a million in comparison to Robin's, which she had earned more than a decade before.

"What did you say you national treasure!?" Sanji growled. "And of course I love the ladies, we can't all be happy with inanimate objects after all."

Ignoring the two arguing men, Hina marched up to the shorter redhead, almost pressing her chest into the redhead's face, causing Luffy to flush and Robin to frown before Hina poked Luffy in the ribs. "No, Hina is only interested in you. Don't think that this cease-fire will last any longer than it takes us to get down onto the real ocean again. I will catch you Luffy, me, Black Cage Hina. You'll pay for what you did and you will face justice. Hina determined."

"And what did I do exactly," the little redhead said, grabbing at Hina's hand, and pushing her away staring up at the taller woman angrily. Although, even now she couldn't help but notice that the woman's breasts were literally at eye height to her. "Besides stealing a ship from you marines, name one thing my crew and I have done that most would term piratical."

She waited, but Hina said nothing, merely glaring back at her, smoke wafting up from her cigarette. "No, if you want to come after me, come after me because you want to prove you're better than me in a fight. Don't try to hide it behind that false justice you Marines always prattle on about, not until you really can say you always serve justice and not the fat fucks in the World Government."

All the Marines in hearing range – which was most of them at this point - growled at that, but Hina simply scowled even fiercer, waving them to silence then took a deep drag of her cigarette, before blowing the smoke from it into Luffy's face. "Hina," she said, "wants to prove that she's better than you. Hina superior."

"Ha, now that's what I want to hear from my marine rival!" Luffy said, giving her a thumbs up to which the other woman rolled her eyes. But she was smiling now, as she moved off to her Marines.

"You there," Hina shouted a second later towards a seemingly random piece of bush. "If you want your wounded and our other prisoners back, you must be willing to talk to us, rather than simply attack or hide away observing us. My requests will be simple, so long as you are willing to talk to us." The Bush for a moment stayed silent, and then Hina growled and pointed. "Marines prepare volley fire! The target will be that bush!"

Even as her crew rushed to prepare their remaining rifles and pistols, the commander of the White Berets popped up, scowling angrily. "How did you know I was there?"

"You suck at hiding," Luffy said behind Hina, shaking her head, while Zoro, Robin and Makino all nodded agreement.

The pink-haired woman marched up to the man, poking him hard in the chest and started to shout at him for causing the earlier incident. He, in turn, shouted back, and Luffy rolled her eyes turning back to her own crew.

"Oh my, you returned," said a new voice to one side, and to Luffy and the other's surprise, Conis stood there, looking at them and Nami and Makino in particular. "You returned from your excursion, did... does that mean you did not go to Upper Yard? Father and I were both worried about that."

"If by Upper Yard you mean the jungle, then we sort of stopped at the edge. But she...," Nami said pointing angrily at Luffy, "is determined to go back!"

"You, you don't want to just leave?" Conis said, pausing and cocking her head in confusion. Confusion, Makino realized, and a bit of trepidation, perhaps even fear. "Why in the world would you want to consciously break the taboo? Kami-sama will punish you."

Luffy shrugged. "Because we're pirates? Because this smells of adventure? Oh, and because a single light show, no matter how overcompensating, is going to be enough to make me change my mind."

Makino was watching Conis carefully now, frowning slightly at the little signs of fear that the woman couldn't quite hide. "Why does that bother you so much my dear?" she asked, stepping forward and giving the girl her best big sisterly (never motherly, not if you wanted to keep your teeth) smile.

The local girl faltered slightly, shaking her head. "It is, it is against the law to go to Upper Yard unless you are summoned by Kami-sama or his aides."

"But we're pirates, we explained that to you before. Surely that doesn't come as any great surprise, that we would not care overmuch about your laws. We're nice, don't get me wrong, and we're not exactly violent, but we certainly aren't going to just obey every law of the land."

"I suppose you're right, it shouldn't bother me when you put it like that, the woman replied ruefully, shrugging her thin shoulders. "But it somehow does. I, I just don't want to see you all put yourselves in danger like that, you all seem too nice for that kind of thing."

"So, what do you suggest we do?" Luffy asked.

"Escape. Leave back to the White Sea at least. There are a few ways you can get there from here. Would you like me to tell you about them?" Conis asked hopefully.

At Nami's look of hope, Luffy rolled her eyes. "Fine, but don't expect us to follow them. I'm still dead set on going to this Upper Yard place." She blinked, then smacked her hands together, "Oh right, we should stock up on food before we go. And do you think you could convince your father to finish fixing up that Waver we found?"

"I, I can certainly speak to him about it yes. And, um, I suppose we can take trade for food," Conis said hesitantly.

"I will handle that. And as part of our payment oh beautiful angel, I will whip up a feast fit for your fair self!" Sanji said with a deep bow to her. Conis blushed visibly at his words, and the girls, including Luffy, exchanged smiles.

Nami was also excited if for a different reason. "Ooh, I'll go with you Sanji, I want to talk to Pagaya about the Waver, ooh, and maybe some Dials and furniture too. If you two are still willing to talk to us, I want to take advantage of that."

"Good thinking Nami," Luffy said with a nod. "In fact, why don't you both concentrate on that while the rest of us go exploring. I doubt we'll need food for this, though we'll need it once we really decide to leave. And with Sanji here to guard ya, those White Beret guys won't be a problem for you."

That caused Nami to both smile and frown, although only the smile was visible. On the one hand, she was, as per her earlier words, happy to be left behind, not wanting to go anywhere near Upper Yard again. But on the other hand, she was getting kind of tired of needing to be looked after. *Maybe some of the Dials can be made into a weapon of some kind for me.* "That sounds like a good idea."

It would have surprised Nami to know that Luffy's thoughts were along the same lines if with a very different emphasis. She wasn't interested in the Upper Yard just for its own sake, but for the Dials and the experience of fighting more of the locals. He wanted to get a better idea of what the Dials could do in combat, and maybe find someone who could start creating weapons from them if it was at all possible. Luffy was many things thanks to his/her old life as Ranma and could keep the ship in good repair whatever damage it took. But creating new weapons was beyond him. Still, despite that lack, she could already see a few ideas from the Dial weapons the White Berets had used, given what Hina and Zoro had said of them.

With a somewhat strained smile, Conis explained where the Resolve should go as well as some about the various currents and such to get away from Angel Island. But once they did, she turned and led the way up the small side stairwell that led up to her and her father's house.

Leaving Nami and Sanji behind, the other five pirates piled onto the Resolve and quickly pulled up anchor, getting underway and moving away from the beachhead. Zoro and Chopper manned the poles and pushed them further into deep water as Robin took the lookout position and Makino the tiller, while Luffy went inside to change clothing and gender in that order.

A minute later there was a noise from below them, a sort of scraping sound. The next second, two claws reached out of the water and grabbed at the broken wings sticking out from the sides of the ship. Luffy, who had just come back on deck, stared at them, before looking at the others. "So, this time I'm going to suggest a vote, gentlemen and ladies. Who here thinks this is a trap?"

Four hands or rather two regular hands went up, followed by Chopper's hoof and a hand appearing from the side of the mainmast giving a thumbs-up sign and Luffy nodded. "I thought so too."

As the ship picked up speed, he went on, still staring at the claws, while Zoro pulled out his swords in anticipation of action. "The question is, should we just go with the flow, let them try and trap us, before proving that catching a tiger by the tail is not exactly a good idea, or break out now and just not get trapped at all."

A mouth appeared above the hand on the mainmast, Robin unwilling to try to shout over the wind of their passage. "Not get trapped at all. Whatever else, letting your opponents dictate the battlefield is stupid, and while I am confident in our abilities that does not mean we should be that arrogant."

"Well in that case," so saying Luffy moved over to the side of the ship, looking over the side. Below them was a giant shrimp, its claws reaching out of the water to grasp the ship by its sides, its tail barely visible behind the aft of the ship, its head below the prow.

Luffy looked over at Zoro who nodded, and the two of them attacked. Luffy lashed out with a punch that smashed the claw on his side into pieces, both the outer shell and the inner meat causing the shrimp to lurch, which in turn caused the ship to heave over to one side, almost going into a circle. The next instant its other claw was chopped off by Zoro. He'd had to try a little harder with his second swing, but he had been able to cut half of the claw off, breaking its grip.

The now badly wounded shrimp dove away from the Resolve, but it was swiftly replaced by another, and another after that Robin saw a long line of them, a very odd kind of stream in the water heading to what was obviously a specific point. But the two fighters got into a rhythm, and after the seventh shrimp was crippled, and the water around them alive with sky sharks attacking the wounded, the shrimps decided to call it a day.

His hands dripping with bits of shell and crab, Luffy shook his head. "Now, let's make our own way to the Upper Yard place. And if we meet this God guy, I want to have a stern word with him about his hospitality."

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High above the so-called holy land of Upper Yard, a massive beanstalk loomed. It was truly a monstrous edifice, fit to dwarf any building that Luffy had seen even in his past life, a mountain made of green. And halfway up this beanstalk, there was a portion of Island Cloud the size of about a football field or so, which had been raised up by the beanstalk from the rest of the land below.

This was the true center of Kami-sama's land, the church as it were. These were the buildings, the reception center and sleeping quarters where Kami-sama and those who personally served him resided. And in its center was the throne, which held the man every being in Skypiea called Kami lounged, one bare foot over the side of his throne as he lolled indolently to the side.

He was an extremely tall man, standing at just a third under nine feet tall, with a muscular, toned body and light blonde hair which he covered by a simple white bandanna. His earlobes had been shaped to stretch halfway down his chest for some reason no one had ever asked about, weighted down by diamond-shaped gold earrings. Beyond his earrings, he wore loose orange pants with a black pattern, and a blue flowing sash, holding up a light-blue veil over his pants. In terms of further jewelry, he wore gold bracelets on both his arms paired with gold anklets on his legs, with two gold rings around his big toes, two to a foot, though beyond that he was barefoot. Leaning against his throne was a gold staff.

His throne was under an open-walled building, with a heavy roof and sides open, with silk awnings that could be pulled down at command. To one side were three elderly men, their heads slightly bowed as they waited to give their advice, or relay word to their people, although with this Kami it was mostly relaying orders. To his other side were an equal number of extremely attractive young women of Conis's age. One of them was currently fanning the Kami of sky Island Skypiea with a large fan as the others waited for their own chance to serve him.

At the moment, he was quiet, which was somewhat normal for him. Now he looked up, laughing loudly. "Hahahah, my word! So they suspected betrayal. These Blue Sea dwellers are not nearly as foolish as they first appear. Or perhaps... perhaps the young lady needs to be punished for not being able to keep the secret."

The man who was known as Kami to one and all - and even himself -scratched at his long drooping ear for a moment thoughtfully, then clapped his hands together. "HAHA yes, that is a good idea. After all, they left the majority of their group behind, and only those five with the most daring spirits are on their way here."

"Oh Kami-sama, do you mean to say that five of the Blue Sea have chosen to come here?" asked one of his so-called advisers.

"Indeed," Enel said to the court in answer to the older man's question. "They are a most straightforward group and have a longing for knowledge and mystery." Clapping his hands and leaning back in his throne popping open his mouth. "Banana."

One of the nearby ladies quickly peeled a banana and held it out to him. Enel bit into it, then chewed thoughtfully, before pointing at one of the older men. "You there, I want you to take a message to McKinley, and to that young lady, Conis was her name I think? I don't want just the five most arrogant and foolish. I want all of the Blue Sea dwellers to come to Upper Yard. After all, rules must be obeyed. The Blue Sea dwellers have set foot on our land, they cannot be allowed to leave."

"Still," he said leaning back and opening his mouth again for another bite before going on after chewing it. "Until the rest of this group arrives, I can enjoy myself watching these five. Hahahahaha!" Even as he laughed though, Enel was wondering something. *Why is it, why is it that a few of these Blue Sea dwellers are glowing in my Mantra more than the others? Such an odd reaction...*

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As the Resolve sailed around Sky Island, they easily spotted the Milky Road, which connected Angel Island to Upper Yard. This was built like a far larger version of the roads that McKinley and his White Berets had attempted to use against Hina and the marines. Getting the ship up on it was a little tough given the size of the schooner in relation to this river, but they managed it, punting along with the aid of Luffy pushing from behind smacking aside a few sky sharks who attempted to try to eat this new creature in their midst.

"Pity that we don't have Sanji around," Luffy said, pulling herself up over the side, kicking another such away, turning to watch as its fellows devoured it instantly. "Those make good eating."

Makino chuckled at that, watching Robin taking notes on the fish, as well as a few other animals they had seen. "What's got you so fascinated, Robin? I thought your interests lay in history, not biology."

"True, but the adaptation we are seeing here is utterly fascinating," Robin said smiling faintly. "How many different species have evolved up here in order to live in conditions that are so oddly changed from what we know? It's very interesting," she paused, then smiled at Luffy, "and makes them quite tasty, yes."

Soon, the river took them to the island Nami and Makino had found. As they went, Luffy realized as he looked at the island that it looked far larger than Angel Island. About an hour later, that was made certain as they had been making their way around the island and had still not gotten back to the stream that had brought them here. Further, it was built up higher than Sky Island: there were no beaches here, only the stone, dirt and roots of the island rising up like a single story wall before the start of the jungle that Makino and Nami had reported.

About another hour's slow sailing brought the Resolve to a stream that seemed to head deeper into the island. There was a manmade arch over it, marked with faces and skulls.

Luffy's eyes narrowed as he looked at it, tugging at his pigtail thoughtfully. He had taken the time to transform into his male form once more and was now dressed in his silk pants and silk shirt open halfway down his chest as this shirt had lost its buttons at some point, along with his straw hat on his head. "This doesn't look suspicious at all," he drawled shaking his head.

"Well, if we consider this holy land as a truly religious site, then we need to look at other such examples in history," Robin said cocking her head to one side thoughtfully. "The prospective believer is usually tested in some fashion. Tests of courage, tests of faith, tests of intellect and even luck are most popular both in historical fiction and fantasy novels."

"So with that in mind, do we leave the ship here and go exploring on foot, or keep following the stream," Luffy asked, looking around at his crew.

"Keep following the stream," Robin said instantly before anyone else could reply. "If we are correct in that regard, that this is designed to be a trap, the stream itself is part of it. However, going off the predetermined script might be even worse on us. The original test is probably designed to make it seem as if the supplicant has a chance. The rest will simply be off-limits and thus deadly. We should play their game until we know exactly what our opposition is like, less we bite off more than we can chew."

"That makes sense," Zoro grunted. "Don't suppose that archaeologist brain of yours would be up to telling us which test will come first?"

"Once more, if it's a religious site, then the spiritual matters far more than the physical. Ergo, I would assume that it would be a physical test of courage first. The types of tests vary in importance, with the first usually being the least important."

Chopper trembled a little, staring at the foreboding sign and the river leading into the island, having second thoughts about this whole venture now. "Um, are, are you sure we should even be doing this? I mean, sure, exploring is great and all, but I'm really getting the impression we'll be angering God if we keep going."

"Bah, God?" Zoro scoffed.

"You're not afraid of God's wrath Zoro?"

"No. After all, I've never once prayed to him, so what is god to me?" Zoro asked with a wry smirk as he looked at the little Zoan fruit user.

Zoro's so cool, Chopper thought, his eyes gleaming.

"I'm going to go get more pistols," Makino said mock-brightly. "Does anyone else want one?"

"We're good," said Zoro and Luffy as one, before exchanging a smile.

The ship entered the river easily, the powerful current carrying it forward at a pretty decent pace and the river several times as wide as the Schooner and more than wide and deep enough for the ship. It didn't leave much water under the bottom, but Luffy didn't think that would be an issue. The Island Cloud under the water of the White-White Sea didn't seem to run to jagged edges.

And almost immediately, Robin's prediction was proven correct. From every side, there came the sound of whirring noise and then the traps were sprung. These took the of large flashing blades appeared everywhere, flashing towards the ship from on high from large hawsers, arrows of various sizes large stones flung through the air from catapults. But the steel blades swinging on long pendulums, some of the blades as large as a man were the most dangerous fit to rip and tear into any ship with the sheer momentum of their swings.

Luffy smashed the first two, while Makino shooting at the ropes holding the blades. Robin concentrated on catching the arrows aimed at the side of the Resolve with her conjured hands. Chopper raced from one side of the ship to the other dealing with the rocks. Zoro, like Luffy, concentrated on the large blades.

After a few minutes though, Luffy stopped. "I think we should leave this to Zoro and Chopper," he said as he sat on the prow of the ship and looking back at them. At the same time, he absentmindedly reached out behind him to smash a large mace that had been coming towards the ship from the front. It shattered, crumbling at his punch.

"What!?" Zoro barked. His swords flashed to either side slicing two of the swinging buzz saws in two before turning to glare at his captain. "You're going to leave this all to me? Well me and the little guy anyway?"

"Think of it as training," Luffy said. He held a hand up in front of his face and for a second being covered by his Busoshoku for a second, before turning back to normal. "I don't really need more training to bring out Haki. But you need speed training and need to get used to being able to cut through steel more regularly. Chopper needs to work on overall speed, his ability to read the flow of a fight and his durability. Feel free to use that Guard Point of yours

Chopper, but I want to see you switching between that and your normal body and back to your Heavy Point. The speed of that change is important too, and puts a strain on your body, right?"

Even as he began to obey Luffy's commands, using his Guard Point to block a stone that would have caved in the schooner's main deck, Chopper was able to answer his voice starting out as a grunt at first, but he got his breath back quickly.

"That's right," he said, nodding his head as he transformed back into his small form and raced to the other side to do the same thing again against a large ballista bolt. "But there might well be an upper limit to that. And remember, I can't use my Rumble balls more than once every six hours and not lose control of my transformations."

"Then this will be a great time to work on your basic skills," Luffy said.

"I don't know," Zoro said, before twisting around towards another giant mace there was coming in behind their ship. Swung by a rope hanging from huge tree trunk that had been set across the river it was fit to take the ship in the aft and crush it.

"Thirty-Six Pound Cannon!" he growled out his attack, his one sword blasting out a long-range attack as Zoro slashed it forward hard enough to create an air attack, sending it into the stone, which shattered followed by the tree behind it. He turned back, shaking Wado Ichimonji at Luffy threateningly. "I think this is just because you're feeling lazy after all that time in the sun."

Then his eyes narrowed as he glared at his captain. "Or because you think that if you foist this off on me you can argue later that it will count."

"Count?" Luffy asked with some amusement while Robin, Chopper, and Makino asked, looked on in confusion at the two monsters of the Straw Hat Crew.

"You know what I mean! You got at least to spar with that Marine Captain, the Rapa guy. And you got to smash that bungee cord of a pirate one. While that isn't much, it's more than I've gotten! I haven't had a good fight since back in the desert kingdom against Mr. 1! And no, taking on those moronic ex-pirates with their stupid suits don't count! And no, guarding the damn ship back in Mock Town doesn't count too. I get the next serious enemy damn it!"

"I'd argue the fight against the pirate ships and Hina's marines before the Knock Up Stream fired off counted as a fight, not to mention those White Beret guys," Luffy replied mildly. At the same time, both he and Zoro smashed an incoming attack, Luffy another buzz saw coming from up top and Zoro a large ballista from the same side Chopper had dealt with before. This sight caused the three watchers to sweatdrop slightly, as it really didn't look as if the two monsters had noticed at all, still looking at one another.

"And you better put down those pellets of yours!" Zoro said, now pointing an accusing finger at Luffy who was tossing several musket balls in the air from the same fist he'd just used to smash the buzz saw. "No making this harder than it already is."

"He's right," Chopper shouted, taking a brief moment out of his own task transform into his large form throwing up his arms. "Come on! We're not your playthings!"

Luffy sighed, letting the musket balls drop. "I suppose you're right, I can't torture you in the name of training just because I'm bored. But you're not the only one that hasn't had a good fight in more than a month Zoro, so why should I promise you to have the next one?"

"Because you've had the best ones going all the way back to when we entered the Grand Line! It's my turn. And no way in hell do those White Beret cannon fodder count as a good fight."

"But then I'll get even more bored, and no one wants that," Luffy said shaking his head.

"A bored Luffy is a dangerous one, something I should make a note of," Robin mused.

"Oh, are you volunteering than to cure his boredom in other ways?" Makino asked the other woman, her eyes narrowed as she looked at Robin.

Robin looked at the other woman sharply, but before she could decide how to answer, Chopper looked around and shouted, "Look, the attacks are done!"

Luffy and Zoro both also looked around, and Luffy sighed. "Alright Zoro, how about we do this: if we run into someone who's an unarmed fighter, he's mine. If the next skilled opponent we see uses a weapon, he's yours. Deal?"

Zoro spat on his hand and held it back. "Deal! No take-backs though." Doing the same, Luffy shook his friend's hand firmly.

Taking her chance, Makino smiled, grabbing Robin's arm. "In that case, since we're entering a jungle I don't think these bikinis Robin and I are wearing are appropriate any longer. We'll just be stepping down to change and be back in a bit."

With that, she literally dragged Robin below, entering the lady's room, where, true to what she had said they would do the two of them began to change clothing. Through it all Robin was tense, waiting for the questioning to start. She wasn't certain exactly what kind of questioning she'd be forced to endure, but she knew it was coming.

"So, what exactly are your intentions toward my Captain?" Makino asked as she finished pulling on a pair of jeans. It matched her blouse readily enough, though the blouse, a floral thing like Sanji's shirt, clashed horribly by the two pistol belts she wore low on her hips. "I

know there's something going on between you so don't bother denying it. You've both been circumspect, surprisingly so in Luffy's case. But that day back in Mock Town that could only have been a date, and I know since then the two of you don't look at one another quite the same at times."

"Shouldn't that be the other way around? It's traditional to ask the man his intentions to the woman after all."

"That'd be true here only half the time," Makino said dryly. "And you're older than he is, and more experienced when it comes to relationships."

"I'm more experienced when it comes to sex, flirting, and using my wiles to get what I want," Robin said with a sigh, looking away as she felt oddly embarrassed to admit this. "That doesn't actually equate to being all that experienced with the emotional side of relationships. I have, as a matter of survival, not become attached to many people in my life on the seas. Indeed, I would say I've only been in one true relationship before this and it most decidedly did not last for very long."

"So it is emotional, this relationship between you and Luffy?" Makino said looking over at her. *Poor Nami, she seems to have waited too long. That's honestly sad, I thought they would be good for one another. But then again, I could say the same thing for Robin and Luffy too.*

"Yes," Robin said surprising herself by how firm that came out. There were still a lot of problems to be worked out considering her past, but Robin found herself unwilling to deny herself when it came to her and Luffy's growing connection any longer. "Yes, I believe it is. Both of us, we, we enjoy one another's company, we find each other attractive. Indeed, I find both his forms attractive, although I haven't yet initiated anything with his female body. We like being around one another and go out of our way to be so. I'm uncertain what else more beyond that there is to a relationship. I... Luffy has become a friend, and more since I met him, and that is, is something I have never allowed myself to have before."

"I see," Makino replied, somewhat amused, and somewhat irritated. She'd had an entire speech ready, but when Robin talked to her so earnestly completely took the wind out of her sails. "Look, I'm not going to go into the whole speech," she said, adding mentally, *anymore*, to that with a pout. "But I am still going to tell you this. He is my captain, just like he is yours right now. Whatever is going on between the two of you, don't let it get in the way of the crew's interactions as a group, and make certain before you let it go any further that, if things don't work out between you, it won't drive a wedge between you or mess up the crew dynamics."

The fact that, once it came out, the relationship would make a mess of at least some of the crew dynamics was a given in Makino's mind. Sanji would weep, wail and curse, but would

eventually get over it. Chopper and Zoro wouldn't care. But Nami... Makino honestly had no idea how the orange-haired girl would react.

"Understood," Robin said with a nod, her own thoughts somewhat similar to Makino's. She too knew that Nami was interested in Luffy, although she didn't know why the girl hadn't acted on that yet. "But I don't think you have anything to worry about us breaking up or making things uncomfortable. I don't think we would have gone beyond light flirtations if we weren't serious. And neither of us are the type to be too effusive in public or anything of that nature. We'll keep our passions private."

"And are there passions? Was that your first date back on Mock Town?"

"It was, one that was grossly interrupted by the Hyena and his crew." With that, Robin told Makino about her and the captain's semi-date as she too changed, changing into shorts and a crop top before once more placing her cowgirl hat on her head.

The two ladies joined the three boys up top, to find that they had dropped anchor, something neither woman had felt for some reason, and worse staring ahead of them. "I'd recommend this is one of those choose your fate things," said Luffy, crossing his arms and pushing up his straw hat with one hand gesturing ahead of the ship.

There a large construct of stone broke out of the water. It was made to look like a giant face, which Robin and Luffy both recognized as something from the Buddhist school, (although neither knew the other had done the same thing,) fronted by four small tunnels separating the river, their interiors black and foreboding. Makino had a moment of fear as she thought about how the Resolve would fit but realized the top of the mainmast would just clear the top of the tunnels. Each tunnel's mouth was made to look like a different face, and above them was a word written out. The four words were Iron, Swamp, Ball and String.

"So each of these probably leads to a different path forward," Luffy said, cocking his head thoughtfully. "The question is what."

"Iron is easy," Zoro said grunting the words. "Swords and combat. I vote for that one."

"That sounds accurate," Robin said with a nod. "Swamp is also self-explanatory. Different challenges, but both lethal. I imagine that a swamp up here would be some manner of giant bog, where if you are unable to find your way forward, you will simply sink forever down into the white cloud, before dropping down to the White Sea below where you no doubt will be devoured by the animals there. Although of course, you would have already suffocated in the swamps."

"That is so disturbing Robin!" Chopper shouted, hiding behind Makino and staring at Robin.

Makino too looked a little disturbed. "Why in the world do you have such a vivid imagination?"

"Whereas Ball... I imagine it would be something along the lines of perhaps entering a tunnel, and a giant ball appearing behind us, fit to crush us to death," Robin went on, staring at all with a pleasant smile on her face.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" Luffy asked, cocking his head to her, watching as a faint smile appeared on her face. *Note to self, Robin has a very dark sense of humor at times. I wonder if it's nature or nurture?*

"String, I could see that going a few ways. Either you end up in a giant spider's web, unable to get out without tying yourself up in knots, or perhaps even meeting the spider in question. Or you suddenly have to cross some kind of gorge on a thin string. One wrong handhold and you fall to your doom to the Blue Sea many hundreds of miles below. The fall from up here would make you go splat against even the surface of a bubble let, alone the surface of the ocean."

"What is it with you and predicting our falling to our doom?" Zoro growled, joining Chopper in becoming disturbed at Robin's predictions.

"I imagine it's because we're so high up," Makino replied for Robin, "it does sort of lend itself to the fear of falling."

"Said the one woman who is actually afraid of heights," Luffy said dryly. "Still, which do we choose?"

"I vote Iron," Zoro reiterated, pointing at it with Sandai Kitetsu. "Iron has to do with swords!"

Makino paused thinking before she replied slowly. "I vote swamp. I'm afraid that the descriptions Robin gave sound far too realistic, but the swamp at least sounds like something we should be able to survive if we are careful."

"Ball!" Chopper shouted. "If it's just a simple ball coming after us, or even a series of them, we could deal with that easily. It'd be just like earlier when we defended the ship."

"Unless of course, we are the ball, and we are to fall into a chute of some kind, and then simply drop off of Sky Island altogether," Robin said 'helpfully'. This caused Chopper to shriek again in fear and attempt to hide behind Makino.

The older woman patted his head lightly, shivering in honest terror at the thought while Zoro began to twitch as they looked at the woman who simply smiled back at them. "She's doing this on purpose isn't she?"

"Probably," Luffy said in reply to Zoro's question, shaking his head. "One doesn't grow up entirely among pirates and criminals without becoming slightly deranged I suppose."

"I'm hurt Captain," Robin said with a chuckle, causing Luffy to twitch this time since he knew that she knew he didn't like being called that. "However, I choose swamp as well. It is the most straightforward type of danger."

"What about you?" Zoro asked Luffy.

Luffy closed his eyes, hopped up onto the prow, and twirled in place several dozen times, slowing down each time, and after the seventh twirl to come to a halt pointing ahead and into the tunnel marked String. "That way it is."

"That's it?" Zoro said incredulously. "That is how you choose our route going forward?"

Luffy shrugged. "It seemed as good a way as any. Besides, this might be the test of luck Robin mentioned earlier rather than a choice of the next type of ordeal we need to face. If so, making it seem as if it was based entirely on luck might be a good thing."

"And do you find yourself particularly lucky today?" Makino asked, looking at Luffy in simple horror at the very idea.

"Not really, but then again, if we're trying to see what the opposition is like around here, does it really matter what trial we face?" Ranma said, confidence ringing out with every word, which made the rest of his crew smile.

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The laughter of Kami-sama caused everyone to stare at him, as he slapped his knee in delight. "Ahahahah, so amusing. These Blue Sea dwellers are truly funny! I do hope they retain that spirit going forward. It would be most irritating to find it was all talk."

Enel's servants looked at him quizzically, but he waved them off still laughing. While a normal individual's Mantra could not carry sound over distance, Enel's Mantra, fueled by his godly power, could if he concentrated on one area at a time. As such he was laughing, having listened to the discussion on board the ship of the Blue Sea dwellers as they decided which route to take going forward.

It was most amusing, and he was waiting eagerly for their meeting with his priests. It could prove most enlightening to them on their position in this world: among the dirt dwellers beneath his feet. Just like everyone else.

OOOOOOO

"String," Zoro mused, frowning. "That sounds well so long as Robin's prediction on what it might mean isn't accurate. I like the Resolve damn it. I'd hate to abandon it."

"True that. Still, let's get a move on." With that, Luffy leaped off the prow, moving to grab one of the punters, as he shouted, "Chopper head back and pull up the anchor. Zoro with me. Makino, Robin, if you could take the tiller?"

Soon the anchor was raised, and Zoro and Luffy worked with the punts, steering them into the tunnel ahead of them marked 'String'.

Elsewhere on the island a man sat on a bird and smiled as his Mantra told the Blue Sea dwellers had decided to enter his territory rather than the other priests. He tapped the bird on the head, and they flew off, as he decided where to make his acquaintance with these fools.

As they entered the tunnel, Luffy suddenly frowned. "You know, I just had a thought. Maybe it's because Robin kept on going on about our falling to our dooms, but..."

"Oh I don't like that start at all," Makino groaned before steeling herself as she glared at Luffy. "Just spit it out!"

"Well, what if this was our test of luck rather than simply a choose your next round of poison kind of thing. What if instead of there being no right answer, there was only one right answer, and all the others drop through the island."

Robin could all too easily imagine that and by the looks on their faces, the others did too. Makino grabbed Luffy by the throat, shaking him mercilessly. "Why did you put that image into my head!?" she growled through gritted teeth. "If that happens, I am so going to curse you for the entirety of my afterlife!"

Luffy just shrugged his shoulders, not at all bothered by the fact his older sister figure was choking him, who just didn't have enough grip strength to cut off his airways. Then the ship came out of the tunnel at the other end and floated out into nothingness for a time, its forward momentum carrying it forward as everyone slowly realized that they had just lost touch with the water underneath her keel.

Makino's shriek of "Dammit Luffy, of all the times for you to be right!" was interrupted by everyone else shouting in fear as the ship started to descend, picking up speed as they went. Everyone lost their footing, with Robin and Chopper leaving the deck entirely floating into the air until Robin's came into play. Dozens of hands grabbed at them from the mast and deck, making certain they stayed put. Makino found herself in Luffy's Arms, held there by one arm as he grabbed at a rope, floating up into the air after Chopper and Robin. Zoro had been close enough to the prow to latch his arms around the railing and hung on like grim death as the ship continued to fall.

About twenty seconds later, they landed into the water again with a splash that covered the entire ship, from prow to stern. This transformed Luffy where she was still holding Makino, but she still held onto the older girl as the ship subsided. The massive 'whump-ker splash' sound soon gave way to the normal creak of the ship, heightened to a new level perhaps, but the Resolve was still in one piece.

"Safe," Luffy muttered, shaking her head. Pushing herself off of the deck, Luffy looked around. "Anyone hurt?"

This was answered by a chorus of groans, but no one seemed hurt and Luffy let Makino go, staring around at the ship in particular up at the mast then at the tiller, which were the most vulnerable parts of the ship. "All in favor of finding whoever designed that thing and ripping them a new asshole say aye."

After everyone had shouted an affirmative to that, she moved to the side of the ship, staring out around her as they found those ships moving gently through a new cloud-based river several hundred feet in the air still thanks to the cloud. It began to remind Luffy of pictures of aqueducts he'd seen pictures of in his past life, just made of the local solid cloud rather than the stone it would obviously. But the rest of the view was just as amazing.

Makino moved to the side as well, then away, shuddering. "Right, we're still too high in the sky for me."

"We've been too high in the sky for a little over half a day Makino-san," Robin said, needing the woman to get back at her for her earlier questioning about her and Luffy's relationship. "And it only now begins to bother you?"

"Oh it bothered me at the time, but it's not so much being high, as being able to **see** that I am high in the air. I will just be standing here well away from the sides of the ship thank you so much," Makino said, moving to the mast and then towards the door leading into what had become the cafeteria and had previously been the captain's quarters. "I'll check for damages in the interior."

Zoro clambered up into the crow's nest, whistling appreciatively as he stared around him. "This is some damn fine view! But it's also weird. It's a jungle out there for sure, hell, I

think Makino and the witch understated things. We're what, eight hundred feet up in the air maybe?"

"More like a thousand and fifty," Luffy replied expertly. As a master of the aerial style of Anything Goes, he could easily calculate that kind of thing.

"Lalalalala, I'm not listening," Makino shouted before she entered the ship and very pointedly closed the door behind her.

Ignoring Makino, Luffy hopped into the air, clambering up after her first mate, crouching next to him as she looked all around before nodding. "Yeah, that is some view."

The ship was slowly winding its way down along a long, wide gentle corkscrew, with a few offshoots here and there, but none of them seemed to go anywhere. Luffy wondered idly how that worked, the multiple levels of the ocean, was really throwing him off here, but it made for some fantastic sailing. The currents here were also quite strong to pull a schooner along as it did now, following the White River as quickly as the Resolve could have with one of its masts.

Yet already, the ship was well into the jungle. What Zoro had noticed were the trees. They looked like regular jungle trees, the kind you'd find in any jungle. But they were monstrously huge, thick and tall, so tall that they made any tree Luffy had ever seen in this life or the last seem small in comparison. The White River they were following had only been above them for a brief time, and now the gentle corkscrew was bringing them down and further down into the trees. So all-encompassing was the jungle that the sky above them almost disappeared in the next few minutes.

Looking back, Luffy stared through the tree branches to try to make out what else could have occurred to them and reported that their fall was only the second-longest. "It looks as if String was about half the length it could have been. The Ball trial looks as if it was a really long fall straight down into the jungle, can't see anywhere it could have ended. The other two are longer moving out of sight to the port and then back the way we came."

She shook her head. "That looks as if that was the purpose of that tunnel, just to make us go to different sections of the island. Although how the heck this all works is beyond me, there are too many darn levels." With a sigh, she hopped back down to the deck and went after Makino, intent on getting some hot water.

Robin frowned in thought moving to the prow as she looked around them, her eyes bright with wonder although the rest of her face looked almost calm. Chopper joined her quickly, his childish delight being much more visible than her own.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to this," Luffy said as he rejoined the others, continuing what he'd been saying a moment before. "I'm not used to thinking of streams being able to

move so, so bereft of the ground around them I guess. And the land here is exactly the same thing too."

"Hmmm..." Robin hummed, staring at the scene in front of her, wondering what about it bothered her. It was only when the White River began to descend to where some of the tree roots could be seen below them that she began to have an inkling. She stared up at the giant trees all around them, and then down at the ground. She did that so many times that Chopper noticed, and asked her, "What's wrong? Er, I'm no expert on trees, but they seem pretty normal to me."

It was as if his words had broken Robin out of a trance, "Normal, of course, but normal for us, not for Sky Island!" with that she hopped up onto the railing and then created a rope of hands from one outstretched arm to grab at a branch, swinging her easily to the nearest tree branch as the ship continued to move behind her.

"Robin, what are you doing?" Luffy asked, surprise in his voice, but no worry. He knew the older woman could handle herself while that little display actually won a grin from Zoro and Chopper, who clapped his hooves together as he shouted that Robin was so cool.

Robin ignored them for a moment, kneeling down, and brushing her hands through the dirt beneath her underneath what looked like a bush that had begun to grow in a small crevice on a much larger tree branch. Pushing through the lawn to touch the dirt underneath, she worked it through her fingers, then looked up at the ship. "It's earth," she said, "dirt."

"Of course it's dirt, what else would it be? Zoro said with a scoff.

"We're on Sky Island," Robin said slowly, staring all around her while Luffy brought the ship to a stop by dropping the anchor. "We're on Sky Island," she said again, looking at them all willing them to understand her point.

Luffy blinked, then got it, staring around them in shock, "We're on Sky Island but this island isn't part of Sky Island!" he shouted Robin's words back to her, shaking his head. "It isn't made of clouds so..." the Straw Hat captain shook his head again much harder this time as a wild idea came to him. "No way!"

Robin began to chuckle as she moved back to the ship, smiling at her captain who seemed to be enthralled and awed as he saw the same theory she had. "I believe that is the only possible explanation," she said simply.

Zoro and Makino looked at the two of them, while Luffy chortled aloud. "This," he said gesturing around them. "This isn't natural up here in the sky, and I believe we all know where it could then have come from."

The first mate frowned in confusion, but Chopper gasped, hopping up and down. "Are you talking about that old legend, the one which Liar Norland told in the child's story before he was executed? About how the island must've been smashed up into the sky? Is that even possible?"

"I do not know if it is possible, but it certainly fits what we are seeing here," Robin said simply. "I am uncertain which segment, or even if it is whole, but this is a portion of Jaya, the portion that housed the City of Gold."

"The Knock Up Stream. Mont Blanc said that its position varied wildly," Luffy said, chortling at the sheer insanity of it all.

"So one time, it appeared underneath the island and just shattered it, bringing this portion up into the sky," Chopper finished, looking around him in all the lights. "But, but doesn't that mean that the city is around here too, is the city of gold!?"

"...I am so glad Nami isn't here right now," Luffy said with a laugh of his own. "I'd have to put her on a freaking leash to keep her from running off to try and find it."

The others all laughed at that bar Robin, who was looking around in delight. She started to think, trying to conjure up the image of the map of the island they had found from the wreckage, which had sparked their interest in Sky Island. But that map was with Nami, in one of her pouches, and she scowled, biting at her lip in a strange gesture of interest and irritation as she tried to work out from their current position where the city of the ancient warriors would be. Since she didn't have an idea where they were in the first place, that was next to impossible.

"Let's not go haring off what willy-nilly," Luffy said causing Robin to look up at him and then her face blanked as she realized how much of her inner thoughts had been visible there. But Luffy went on talking calmly. "Remember, you said it earlier. This could be enemy territory. So let's explore as much of this island as we can by ship, then by land."

Looking back at him, Robin could not argue.

After that, with Robin and Chopper on watch, Luffy and Zoro surveyed the ship for a time, making sure it hadn't taken much damage from its short fall and found very little damage on top. A few of the deck's wooden boards had loosened, but that was all. The sides of the ship had been damaged in two places though, when two cannons were bounced loose from their runnels, again. This time though the cannons themselves weren't damaged thankfully.

Underneath the waterline though, Zoro found several places where the connection between a few of the hull's boards had been loosened, the ship now was taking on trickles of water, forcing Makino, Luffy, and Zoro to work on that problem for a time. But that was the worst damage. The Resolve was a tough little vessel.

"It's a good little ship," Luffy said tapping the side of the hull from the inside as he made his way out of the hold. With that, he went over the side and started to repair the damage done there, while Zoro went to work in the gun deck

As they continued on, the jungle slowly began to close in around them the trees growing into and away from one another, creating odd shapes here and there, with carved faces masks and other things visible randomly. It was an interesting effect, but the two workers ignored it, while Chopper and Robin talked quietly to one another about what it could mean. Makino was busy making up a meal for them all, after cleaning up inside a bit, since it was getting on to dinnertime.

Ahead of them, a case in point was a tree branch having grown over the river to seemingly merge into a second tree's branches. This created a small walkway that looked as if it could reasonably be used for a cart or perhaps three people walking side-by-side.

On it were carved numerous masks, and Chopper shivered as they seemed to glare down at the ship as it passed. *And gah, is that a skull I see up there!?* It wasn't the last of those they saw either as they began to pass more of them as the ship continued on. Soon Robin had spotted them too, skulls stuck onto smaller branches to on the top of spears set into trees.

And then, for some reason, the ship began to slow down. No one noticed at first, but as he shifted to work on the other damaged gun port, Luffy frowned looking around him. *I thought something had touched my back just then, but I don't see anything.* Then, as he continued on, he noticed how much slower the ship was moving in comparison to the current below them. "What the heck?"

"What?" Zoro said from inside barely grunting as he moved the gun to the side. It looked all right, but they'd have Chopper get inside later to make sure that the interior of the barrel was still smooth enough to fire. Any kind of damage to the inside of the cannon barrel would cause the cannonball to misfire, which would be a very bad thing.

"We're slowing down, but the current isn't," Luffy said. He gestured back up to the top deck, in front of the gun port, telling Zoro, "Come on, I think we need to have all hands on deck something is going on here."

Luffy climbed up the side of the boat, frowning as he felt something touch his back again through his shirt, twisting his neck around to look, but he saw nothing. He wondered what that was, before deciding to ignore it for now.

The five of them joined together at the prow, staring down around them as the ship slowed further, actually coming to a stop as they watched, confused. "What the heck is going on?" Luffy muttered shaking his head. There seemed to be something shivering in the air for a second, but before Luffy could figure out what had stopped his ship in its tracks a new voice interrupted them.

"What is going on, is that you chose your fate," that voice from above them, causing all of them to look up. The Resolve had reached yet another of those odd walk paths made of branches that had grown across the stream.

Sitting up there was a giant purple bird, with long red feathers around its neck, a nasty looking beak and beady yellow eyes. On top of the bird sat its rider. He was of medium height, with wings that looked a bit larger than most the crew had seen so far. He wore a jacket lined with fur and brown sleeves marked by a crisscross pattern of dark brown and light tan along with orange pants, fur-lined gloves and boots, and a purple scarf around his neck. On his head, he wore what Luffy recognized as an aviator hat from way back in his old life complete with goggles and had a really nicely cared for pointed mustache.

He looked down at them, a smile of somehow dark joy on his face, as he took them in. "You chose your fate," he said again, "and now find yourselves stuck here, in the Ordeal of String."

"String?" Luffy said, frowning he didn't see any but, perhaps thin enough string could be invisible. And enough of them, so long as they are somewhat strong, could bring the Resolve to a standstill. He strained his ears and, now knowing what to look out for, was able to hear something over the sound of the forest, a sort of tinkling, twanging kind of noise as the Resolve strained against its new bonds.

"Indeed. I am Shura and this is my ordeal, created by me in homage to Kami-sama. The survivability of those who enter it is but three percent. Your fate was decided the moment you entered Upper Yard. If you had tried to flee, perhaps you could have gotten away, but coming here as you have, you have broken a taboo set by Kami-sama, and for that you..."

He was interrupted at that point by a shout from Zoro "Yes!" With that, the swordsman strode forward, sending a smirk over his shoulder. "You promised Captain, and he got a weapon. He's mine!"

Luffy looked up again and noticed that yes, Shura did have a weapon, a long iron lance like that of the Knight of the Sky they had met earlier that day down on the White Sea after their run-in with the mask-wearing attacker. "Dammit fine! But I get the next one."

"You not going to argue?" Zoro asked looking at him.

Luffy shrugged, "We promised. He's yours. Unless of course, it looks like you're going down. In that case, I'll step in."

"Hah!" With a wicked grin, Zoro started to pull out his swords, "Like I'll let that happen. I have my pride after all."

"Has anyone told you two you're weird lately?" Makino asked shaking her head. Even so, she had moved to lean back against the foremost mast, staring at the man and Zoro, wondering how this was going to play out.

"There's no point in arguing between yourselves anyway," the man above them said, smirking as he pulled his aviator goggles down over his eyes and couched his lance. "I intend to kill you all right here anyway."

With that, the bird launched itself forward, down towards the ship, a fireball appearing and flashing down towards them before he banked upwards, zooming between the masts before aiming toward Robin where she stood by the tiller. Zoro dissipated the fireball with a blast of air from one of his swords, but the man got past him, his lance out and thrusting towards Robin.

Having been standing beside his book buddy, Chopper instantly grew and smashed the lance to one side with a fist. But the man moved with it almost as if he'd been predicting that, coming up and off of the back of his bird and launching himself into a kick that took Chopper in the chest, flinging him back down onto the main deck from the stern.

He then twisted around, thrusting out towards Robin once more only for his eyes to widen and then leap into the air where his bird flew under him firing another fireball down at Robin. Then Luffy was there, a Rankyaku dissipating this second fireball easily.

"Oy," Luffy growled, crouching on the railing separating the main deck from the raised stern deck as he glared up at the flying man. "Your opponent's Zoro, not the rest of my crew or my ship! Keep your fire to yourself asshole, or you won't live to regret it."

The man ignored what he thought of as false bravado from the straw-hat wearing man, scowling as he stared down at Robin who it had been in the process of crossing her arms. "That was almost dangerous. What an odd power you possess."

Luffy's eyes narrowed at that, but before he could say anything, Zoro voiced his own anger at the man's trying to involve the others.

"Luffy's right! What part about you're fighting me didn't you understand, asshole!" Zoro shouted, leaping into the air after the man bouncing twice, as he pulled out Wado Ichimonji and locked it into his mouth, bringing the two swords twisting into, "Tatsumaki!" that the man blocked if barely, grimacing as he moved away from Zoro then back in, exchanging blows with the Santoryu user.

But he did it so swiftly that again Luffy thought for a moment that he had anticipated Zoro's attack. "Zoro, be on your guard. He seems to have some Kenbunshoku Haki ability."

The two combatants started to exchange blows then, with Zoro using Geppo to bounce around. Shura, in turn, used his bird, the bird's claws and beak matching Zoro's blades for now along with Shura's lance. Twice the man lashed out with fireballs, but Zoro dodged. Many times Shura and his bird acted as one, dodging an attack by the skin of his teeth and then attacking with precision, but Zoro would block his attacks. Yet whereas Zoro's defense relied on speed, Shura's relied on just not being where Zoro was attacking.

"That's the sensing type of Haki, right?" Chopper asked, staring up at the battle going on above the ship. "The one that lets you somehow predict your enemy's attacks?"

"Right. It's the tougher type to learn in my opinion, although that's probably just me," Luffy said with a shrug. "Still, it's easy enough to overcome, if your own basic abilities are high enough. Just watch."

True to his captain's prediction, Zoro soon changed his style. His movements shifted subtly, becoming almost more primal, less organized. He came out of his Tatsumaki into his basic Oni Giri slash only to break off halfway through his normal charge and lashed out with a cut from Wado, which Shura barely dodged, then thrust out hard with his cursed blade, nearly spearing Shura's bird before he forced it to bank to the side. Then Zoro bounced up and over the man in a show of Geppo skill that caused Luffy to nod appreciatively, though the man anticipated it, backing away.

He now circled the ship, watching thoughtfully as Zoro kept bouncing in the air, his swords at the ready as he twisted around to match Shura's moves. "That's an interesting ability you Blue Sea dwellers have there. But I'm afraid it will not prevail you against the ordeal of string." Shura's fingers twitched then and there was a slight shiver in the air.

Luffy frowned, moving as if to uncross his arms from where he had been crouching only to find himself unable to come out of his crouch. He looked down at his body, now feeling suddenly, within that split-second several thousand pieces of string tying him down. "What the heck!?" *Where in the world did they come from? Some kind of trap? No, I would have felt it, unless it was a subtle thing and he just pulled them taut just now?*

"As I said, none of you are going to survive the ordeal of string," Shura said, zooming forward, his lance heating up like a hot poker as he thrust for Zoro's chest. The swordsman, like the rest of the crew, had become trapped in who knew how many invisible pieces of string, but he wasn't quite as trapped as the others were, being in midair at the time. "This is cloud string, thin, but incredibly strong. Try moving and it will simply slice you into pieces. Still, do not worry, I won't let you die in such a painful manner. I will put you all out of your misery now."

Zoro grunted with effort and shouted in anger as he twisted his body around, blocking Shura's lands, but he couldn't block the next blow as Shura came up over his lance, thrusting out with his other hand. "This is the reality of sky combat," he intoned, as his hand pressed into

Zoro's chest right above where the swords had been crossed to block the lance blow. "Impact Dial."

There was a loud booming sound, like the sound of an undercharged cannon going off and Zoro jerked backward, groaning in pain but still held in place by the string that had captured him and all the others. Shura moved off, circling the ship again, smirking down at them. "Your ability to bounce in the air, to send air attacks from your legs and weapons out like that, the dark-skinned woman's odd ability to summon hands out of nowhere, they are magnificent. But only for Blue Sea dwellers. Up here in Skypiea, combat has evolved to a degree far higher than anything that could be found down on the Blue Sea."

He circled around the ship, laughing as his bird launched another fireball down at the ship. "Realize your helplessness and despair."

Robin grunted, unable to move her arms, and Makino found herself in a similar position as did Chopper as the fireball continued towards them. All of them began to look worried, but Luffy didn't. He twisted his head, fighting against the strings as even more of them began to wound around him somehow, coming from somewhere nearby, he couldn't figure out where. But honestly, that didn't matter much. "You all right to continue Zoro?"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" the voice said from above, causing Shura to flip around in midair to look at Zoro thoughtfully. The first mate grimaced, spitting out to one side as he glared at Shura, shaking his head. "As for you, bird-guy, I think I should apologize."

With that Zoro tensed his entire body almost to the point of Tekkai and then moved, snapping the string around him with a grimace of concentration and pain – after all Tekkai shouldn't be used while moving –, while Shura looked on in surprise. The next second a barely formed air pressure attack lashed out from his swords, smashing into the fireball and dissipating it.

"Yeah, your words and acting was so over the top, we weren't taking you seriously. But you're actually someone of substance," Luffy said, slowly pushing his arms out to either side despite the strings covering his body, trusting in his body's normal durability to let him move without the string cutting into him. He was right to do so and soon proceeded to twist his hands in such a way, as to grab at the string around his arms, which had bundled up there thanks to his movements.

Shura was shocked to see that, but his shock rose further as the string wasn't carving Luffy into pieces as he moved. But then he gaped as his Mantra told him what Luffy was about to do. "Wait, what, how..."

As the priest watched Luffy roared and pulled his arms forward, putting all his strength into it. The strings tied around his arms didn't break like those around his chest and upper arms, not having been that tight around him, but still constricting his movements. The reason

they had been, was because those strings had been tied to nearby tree branches, tying him down like a ship at dock, just like the Resolve was. But now, Luffy pulled the strings and ripped those branches, those giant tree branches, larger than most masts, right off their parent trees lashing them forward into further branches to either side of them causing them in turn to shatter.

Just like that, the Resolve was suddenly free, moving forward again under the command of the current below them like a horse finally loosed from its paddock. Just for a second, Luffy felt something, a shiver or something through the deck but it was gone so fast he thought it must have been his imagination. Shaking that off, Luffy smirked up at Shura. "Your string trick's neat and very sneaky," he said simply "but not exactly unbeatable."

"That's right," Zoro said, flexing his hands before tying his bandanna in place and once more pulling his swords back out. "No trick like that is unbeatable, so long as you're strong enough."

Flying above the carnage below as he watched his carefully prepared trap of string be shattered like this, Shura ground his teeth angrily. "Arrogance! Your arrogance will be your undoing this day Blue Sea dwellers!" he shouted, as his lance ignited and he charged down towards Zoro. "But if you wish to be the first, then be my guest!"

OOOOOOO

While the five intrepid explorers had sailed off, McKinley and Hina continued to argue on the beach. Up in Pagaya and Conis's house, Sanji and Nami stood outside on the balcony, with the orange-haired girl smacking the balcony railing angrily as she took in the bit of White-White Sea where the Resolve had been sitting at anchor. "I can't believe this. I can't believe he just left like that."

"Do not worry Nami-swan, you still have me after all and the shitty captain will return. He'd better, since he took both Makino-swan and Robin-chwan with him," Sanji practically snarled. In actuality, the cook took his being left behind to, quite honestly, straight up act as a bodyguard for Nami as a distinct compliment. As the cook, Sanji knew that they didn't actually need all that much in the way of food. More fruit was always helpful, but not necessary. That was just make-work. No, Sanji knew he was there to guard Nami. "Come in and eat something, my dear. Beyond that and waiting for Pagaya to finish work on the Jet Dial we really don't have anything else we need to be doing right now."

"Grr," Nami muttered, although inside she was wondering why she was so angry about this even as she followed Sanji back inside. It had been her idea to be left behind with Sanji and

the marines, but Nami honestly hadn't expected nearly the entire crew to agree with Luffy on exploration being more important than self-preservation. And the fact Robin had gone with them was also bothering her in some fashion she refused to think about too much.

In about twenty minutes or so, Sanji had gotten used to the various cooking Dials, the food on hand, then whipped up a feast for the two ladies with enough left over to give Pagaya enough food for later when he finished work on the Jet Dial. Both girls heaped praises on him as they continued their conversation from earlier, which was about Conis acting as a go-between for the crew and the other locals in purchasing Dials and furniture. Sanji interjected a few comments on the Dials and the food, but otherwise waited on them hand and foot, happy to do it.

Eventually, the conversation slowed down as Conis and Nami had agreed on the various prices the pirates were willing to pay and how, and Conis's eyes flicked from Nami to Sanji as the cook bowed over her, pouring her a glass of wine.

From the blush on the girl's face, Sanji's over-the-top flirting was getting somewhere for certain and Nami found herself actually happy for the guy. He wasn't her type, way too over-the-top with it all of his chivalry and stuff, but that didn't mean that she didn't want to see them happy. *I just hope he remembers not to let it get too far. We're not staying here after all.*

"Ano, are, are you truly criminals down on the Blue Sea?" Conis asked. "It's just, you've all been so nice and you just don't seem to be the types to be law-breakers."

"We're a kind of pirates I guess, although we haven't really done much real pirating, stealing from other people, laying waste to whatever in our path and suchlike," Nami replied with a wave of her hand. "We've mostly fought other pirates, which isn't exactly piratical to most people. We're more a crew of dreamers than anything else. Sanji-kun, what was that term Luffy used the other day?"

"Buccaneers, I believe Nami-swan. Pirates who simply are chasing dreams irrespective of laws and common sense." Sanji breathed in from his cigarette, smiling at Conis, "That's us. We all have dreams that matter far more than our lives and we're all willing to push forward with them regardless of opposition."

"I, I see," Conis replied, looking a little awed at Sanji's fervor.

The conversation was interrupted at that point by Pagaya coming out of his shop, which was set underneath and to the side of the house down another small stairway cut into the cloud of Sky Island. "AH, I'm sorry, but I have finished repairing the Jet Waver." The man's extremely bushy brows furrowed as he looked at Nami. "I have to warn you, but this, this Jet Dial will be a handful, even above a normal Waver. I wish to warn you before you try to use it. I'm sorry."

Moments later, Pagaya's jaw had dropped while the three of them watched Nami zipped around on the ocean in front of them on the jet Waver, her laughter reaching them over the sound of her passage. It was even faster than Pagaya's Waver and even harder to use. But to her, it was simply good old-fashioned fun, and her grin was so wide it resembled that of a pumpkin as she pulled into the shore next to Pagaya, hopping off and giving him a hug. "It's wonderful! It's just amazing, thank you so much. How much do we owe you for it?"

"No, no, I'm sorry, but I won't take payment for this. It belongs to you after all and working on it was a fascinating project," the man said, looking a little uneasy at the hug from the woman. "I am simply glad that you enjoyed it and can use it so readily. I have never heard of anyone being able to figure out how to use Wavers this quickly, let alone one of the near-extinct jet Wavers."

"Well thank you for the work anyway!" Nami then sighed and looked out to the ocean, shaking her head, "I suppose then, that we need to wait for our crew to come back."

"Could you tell me some of your adventures while we wait?" Conis asked, to which both pirates nodded, and moved over to the small pagoda and the lounge chairs there with the two locals.

Nearby, Hina scowled as she stared at McKinley, who had just again rebuffed her attempts to demand a fair trade between them, her prisoners for a ship. The two of them had been talking for more than an hour now since she had called him out from his hiding place, but her attempts to explain the differences between marines and pirates and why his actions had been unnecessary towards her crew had fallen on deaf ears.

At this point, she was starting to lose hope frankly, but she needed to get her troops away from the pirates, even Nami and Sanji. A case in point of this was going on nearby, while Nami had been trying out the Jet waver. A number of her troops had been shouting and cheering the young navigator on and were even now crowding around the pagoda to both flirt with the two girls and listen to the pirates talk about their adventures.

She was thankful that the rest of them were no longer around and the reason was simple: erosion of purpose. Marines could not become friendly with pirates. They had to see pirates as a whole same as unremitting animals to do their job. The instant a marine realized that pirates were simply people, and there could be good and bad pirates, was the moment that everything got all too complicated to deal with. Hina had long understood that and deeply regretted it, even more so now after interacting with Luffy.

Because Luffy and his crew were all too human, all too relatable. Luffy, in particular, brought that reaction out in her, but Hina was determined to do her duty, and that meant keeping the fact they were pirates uppermost in her mind and the minds of her marines. When next they stood to in order to blast a pirate with buckshot, she didn't need her troops to be thinking about the lives of the pirates they were about to take.

As McKinley once more attempted to blame her and her crew for fighting back, Hina lost her temper.

"Now you will listen! **You** started that fight, trying to pin us down with your laws! I am a marine I recognize the tactic and I don't care why you attempted it, but everything that happened is your fault, my dead, **your** dead are on your hands!" she roared, pointing towards the four dead locals laid out to one side of the prisoners along with two of her own. Each had their shirt off covering their faces, which was the best they could do for them.

As McKinley ground his teeth "But I am still willing to believe this was an accident, caused by gross stupidity on your part. You need to realize that we are both the same, it is just that your jurisdiction only runs here, while my jurisdiction runs everywhere in the world. The world is a vast, vast place McKinley, far larger than your area."

McKinley looked at her, then looked away, something like guilt and fear crossing his face for a moment as he whispered his response. "You have no jurisdiction in Skypiea you are simply an outsider here. And as for the rest of what you said, we have a saying here. 'The world is vast, but still, there is only one Kami-sama'."

Hina frowned at him, trying to understand the emotions she was seeing there, but she didn't get a chance to question him about them. She turned in the same direction he did as he shouted, "Lord Arthur, what are you doing here?" She looked and saw an elderly man dressed like the rest of the locals, coming towards them down the stairwell leading up to the town.

As the man came close, he smiled at them all, bowing his head slightly, "Kami-sama sent me to discuss things with these Blue Sea dwellers. We have become aware of certain unusual facts about them. You may stand down Captain." As McKinley saluted and stepped back the man turned to Hina. "You would be the leader of the uniformed portion of the Blue Sea dwellers?" he asked the woman in front of McKinley.

"I am, captain Hina, of the Marines," she replied.

"Marines," he mused, that is what kami-sama heard yes. You must excuse Captain McKinley. It has been many centuries since the White Berets dealt with a band of like-minded individuals from the Blue Sea. Most of the people we see from the Blue Sea are pirates. And I understand that to compound things, you arrived with pirates, and not your own ship?"

Hina grimaced. She'd been afraid it was something like that. McKinley hadn't seemed to understand what marines were at all, let alone why they were different from pirates. Indeed, it was only her continued mention of his wounded that they had captured that kept him talking to her at all. "We came up via the Knock Up Stream, but my crew and I were not prepared for it. We were in point of fact fighting the pirates that we arrived with."

The man blinked in some surprise. "And yet you are not fighting them now?" he asked gently.

"Our ship was heavily damaged by the Knock Up Stream, its keel was broken, unable to be repaired. If not for the pirates willing to extend an armistice to us, all of my people would have drowned down in the White Sea."

Once more the older man blinked, slowly taking this in. "Very unusual for pirates then, I would assume. And, that is the group that has gone off with the ship you all arrived in?"

"Exactly yes," Hina said, making no motion to bring attention to Sanji or Nami, hidden as they were at present behind the bodies of several of her marines who were also listening to their tales. Their different clothing to her Marines would have been obvious, but she saw no reason to bring that to this man's attention. Further talk about the difference between Marines and pirates and the fact that their two crews were in a long-term cease-fire would only complicate matters.

"And true to his orders when it comes to Blue Sea dwellers Captain McKinley tried to force a fight upon you, in order to capture you and make sure that you could make no more trouble here believing all of you were murderous pirates, regardless of what you might have told him before the fight."

"I told Captain McKinley I was willing to see it all as a misunderstanding despite my own dead," Hina said, her voice hardening.

The man nodded and sighed. "I cannot do anything for the pirate crew that left, their future is in Kami-sama's hands. But you and yours need not be painted with the same brush any longer. In recompense for your dead, we will give you a ship, so long as we have your assurance that you will take that ship and leave. While we respect the Marines and the ideals you supposedly fight for, you have no jurisdiction here, and that will never change."

Another Marine Captain might've argued. Smoker surely would have if he'd even bothered talking to the locals at all, believing that the jurisdiction of the Marines took precedence over everything. But Hina was far more diplomatic than he was and was well aware of precisely how weak her position was here. "Agreed. If you can give us a ship, my men and I will leave as quickly as possible. We will have to procure supplies of course but I believe we have money for that, so long as beli notes can be used to exchange for local Extol.

"No, they cannot be, but do not worry, we will also furnish you with supplies," the man said waving that off. "As I said, getting you out of here at speed is the thing."

Hina breathed a sigh of relief nodding her head. "Hina thanks you," she said simply. "Hina thankful."

Blinking at the woman's odd verbal tick, the man nodded, gesturing to McKinley to come close for a moment, whispering in his ear, then sending him off. "McKinley will prepare the ship and gather the supplies. We ask that you as you move through the town, do so in an organized and quick fashion. Again, the locals do not have any good memories of Blue Sea dwellers. Even if they paid to enter, they always cause trouble eventually as the pirates who went off will no doubt do."

"Hina understands and finds your requests more than reasonable. Hina understanding" she said effusively, glad that she would soon have a ship of her own under her feet once more. Even if it was one of the odd ones around here with their Wavers rather than wind-powered, it would still be a ship and would allow Hina to become independent of the pirates.

The man nodded at that, then turned, gathering Conis to him with a gesture. "Conis, could I speak to you for a moment?"

The young girl heard him and turned in the older man's direction, paling slightly. But as the man gestured she stood up and, after thanking Nami and Sanji for their stories, moved through the marines towards the man. They moved off away from everyone and Nami frowned as she noticed something odd in Conis's body language. But she couldn't quite put a finger on it, while Pagaya asked a question about navigation down on the Grand Line, and if it was different, neatly grabbing her attention.

After a few moments listening to what Kami-sama required of her, Conis trembled, staring in shock and a bit of disgust as the elder stood in front of her, smiling faintly at her. As he did, his eyes were both condemning and kind. So Kami-sama requires you to lead this group of Blue Sea dwellers, and then tell them how to leave, via the White Sea. The Super Speedy Shrimp will do the rest.

"I am to, to then direct them to the sacrifice, as we attempted to do with the others?" Conis asked. That attempt had nearly broken her heart, and she had honestly been grateful to know that Luffy would completely disregard her directions to leave, which would have sent him in the completely wrong direction. But this, this might even be worse.

"Indeed. This group does not seem to understand what happened to that group, and, that group undergoing an ordeal of their own. Well done," the man said, smiling as he knew that the woman was not going to take that well. She didn't, and flinched, looking away guiltily. "You do what you must, as we all do to serve Kami-sama's will." *And survive*, he left unsaid, though those words still had an impact.

She flinched, visibly trying to stop herself from looking up into the sky, from where Kami's judgment could occur at any moment. "I, I will do my duty again," she said nodding her head.

"Good," the man said sighing faintly well. "And once this is all over, you and your father may go back to your lives again." With that, he released her to go back to the Blue Sea dwellers turning to make his way back up the stairs.

Conis rejoined them, as Hina was discussing with Sanji and Nami what they would do. "The locals want the two of you with us, and after they explained things to me, I can see their point. They want all of us out, and given how independent Sky Island is, I don't have a leg to stand on trying to convince them to let the two of you stay behind alone."

"What about our crew? What will happen to them?" Nami asked while Sanji moaned about being worried about Robin and Makino.

"The old man, his name was Arthur, said that their fate is in god's hands, whatever that means. Hina irreligious," Hina said with a shrug. "But she supposes, that he simply means that it will be up to chance if they are able to get away from the Holy Land without angering the locals. If they do, however, they, and us, are free and clear and will be free to go on our merry way."

Nami scowled angrily. "Are you saying, that we'll be your prisoners?"

"Hina incredulous. Are you prisoners now?" She gestured at the jet Waver that Sanji was propping up. You will be free to go with that, as soon as we are away from Sky Island. That is, again, the important factor right now: that we leave. I don't like how they are so demanding on that point while being so accommodating in other ways but I can understand it. The people may be friendly, the government isn't. That's not exactly unusual, especially when you consider that most of the Blue Sea dwellers they deal with are pirates, and far more normal pirates than your lot."

Nami scowled but nodded. "Fine, let's go."

With that, the two pirates joined the Marines, moving to the front of the column almost automatically as it formed up, leaving the prisoners behind to be sorted out by McKinley, along with Hina, and Fullbody, who nodded brusquely to Nami before almost glaring at Sanji, who smirked back, taking a long drag of his cigarette as he did so.

The reason for the man's ire was readily apparent as Hina turned to the cook, also smoking a cigarette for the third time that day "Hina wants to thank you for the loan of several of your cigarettes, Cook-san. Hina addicted."

"Not a problem at all. For someone so divinely gorgeous as you, a packet of cigarettes was a small price to pay to simply being in your presence."

In response to the pirate cook's over the top flirting Hina giggled, causing many of the Marines to think very murderous thoughts about Sanji, while Nami rolled her eyes and began to engage Conis in further talks about Wavers and Dials.

The group moved through the town, which was comprised almost like a mountain town, with lots of stores and houses built up out of the Seastone-laden cloud, with others build of the same material at the top of small or long stairways. There was some kind of quarry in the distance to one side of the large stairwell leading up to the rest of the town, excavating bits of the stone for use.

There were people around, but after a glance at Conis and McKinley, they moved off, not interacting with the marines at all. Hucksters even fell quiet, not trying to ply the marines with their wares. Halfway to the peer, Nami started to notice this and not only was everyone avoiding them like the plague, but Conis had started to shake again. *There is something very wrong going on here*, she thought, shaking her head.

She began to ply Conis with more questions about the town, specifics rather than generalities or stuff about fashion. In many ways it sounded idyllic, but whenever the question got around to god, and what his laws really were, Conis clamped up.

It was bizarre to Nami, and she finally stopped talking to the girl, letting Sanji begin his flirting without her interfering falling back to walk beside Hina. The older woman looked at her, one pink eyebrow rising. "You have something to say?"

"Have you noticed how everyone's looking at us?"

"Somewhat yes. I thought it was just the fact that we were outsiders, Blue Sea dwellers as they put it, and Blue Sea dwellers always bring trouble. But by your tone, you think it is something else?"

"I think it's something to do with this holy land and God," Nami replied, her eyes narrowed as she looked at the back of Conis' head. "And Conis seems to be shaking more and more as we go along."

"An ambush, do you think? With her being forced to lead us into it?"

"No, that doesn't seem to be it. I doubt that idiot McKinley or his troops would try you again after all given the beat down you and Zoro apparently gave them. No, this is something else. I just wanted to warn you to be ready for anything."

Hina barely nodded, before Nami moved ahead of her again, moving on to Conis' other side. As they went, Sanji dominated the discussion, asking questions about the various Wavers as they reached the wharf. Conis pointed out the Little Crow, which was the only Waver she

could drive, before motioning them on to the largest Waver on the wharf, a large, bull-headed Waver.

But as she was talking, Nami had continued to watch her and as they reached the Waver, the old man had apparently given over to the Marines, she spoke up. "You're shaking Conis." The other young woman twitched, looking wide-eyed at her before looking away. She tried to open her mouth to say something, but Nami went on frowning. "What are you afraid of? And... why are you looking so guilty right now?"

"Nami-swan!" Sanji said, frowning at the orange-haired girl for the first time she could remember. "What are you talking about?"

"Conis?" Nami asked. "Something stinks around here, and I think you know it too. So what are you feeling guilty about? Trust me I'm an expert on feeling guilty, I know all the signs, and you've got them in abundance." She smiled, putting a hand on the other girl's shoulder, "But let me tell you, coming clean helps a lot with that kind of thing, and we're friends, we're not going to turn on you for whatever is happening here."

At Nami's supportive but worried face, and Sanji's concerned one, Conis began to break down. "I, I cannot, I can't do this!" she wailed, shaking her head. "Whatever you call yourselves, you two, your crew and even the marines, none of you have done anything to, to be faced with what might happen to you. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

Hina sighed, exchanging a look with Nami, while Sanji started to get angry, but at what was unclear just yet. At the same time around them, the Skypieans working the peer were all staring at Conis in horror. "And what can't you do Conis? Hina curious."

"A, all Blue Sea dwellers who break the law are, are to be lead to Upper Yard. We cannot argue against it, or even warn you, if, if we do, we are put to death. That is Kami-sama's will, and..."

At that point, the shrieks of sheer terror from the surrounding Skypieans gave the rest of the story to Hina and the others. "**No!** Conis has called down Kami-sama's wrath!"

"Flee, run away!"

"Hopefully Kami-sama's wrath will only strike her down, the foolish girl!"

Even McKinley ran, gritting his teeth and shaking his head. "Damn it, all she had to do was just deliver them to Upper Yard. Now, now her compassion will lead to her death. But of all the Skypieans he alone stopped running shortly, hiding nearby to watch and listen to what occurred next. Someone had to witness it after all. Someone had to see Conis die and remember it.

"So God punishes anyone who comes here from the outside world?" Nami said slowly, while Hina looked around them, scowling and nearly biting through her cigarette as she watched the screaming, fleeing Skypieans. At the same time, Sanji knelt in front of the crying Conis grabbing her arms as Nami went on. "And God also kills anyone who warns someone that punishment is coming?"

Conis could only nod, sobbing into her hands.

Then Sanji shook her hard, causing the girls to look up in shock to see his angry expression, which, to her astonishment, was not directed at her. No, when he spoke, he spoke the same thing Nami did, the other girl roaring the words into her ear. "So why did you warn us?!"

The girl gaped at them, but Sanji continued to shake her, gentler now, but still earnestly. "My crewmates and I are all pirates, even Nami-chwan and Chopper are able to look after themselves, we could have muddled through. But if they come after you then..."

Nearby McKinley looked at this with wide eyes as Hina shook her head at the odd reaction from a bunch of pirates, smiling as she thought about this odd bunch of pirates.

"WH... why? How can Blue Sea dwellers be so concerned over someone not of their crew? Have they no fear for their own lives? Or is this just an act?" the White beret captain muttered. "But wait, perhaps they are simply ignorant. When Kami-sama's wrath shows itself, then we will see."

Suddenly the sky above them began to glow, a loud thrumming noise building in the background and slowly making itself heard by those below. All eyes turned in that direction, as the watching McKinley stared at the Blue Sea dwellers while he took shelter with a few of his men. "It's too late for her, she profaned the will of Kami-sama. But now, prove yourselves as perfidious as every other Blue Sea dweller. Run, leave her to her death as we have seen every other time from Blue Sea dwellers when faced with Kami-sama's wrath."

Do so, just like we would he thought to himself, as around him every other Skypiean continued to race away from the sight of Kami-sama's wrath. *Do so, and prove again that you, just like we, are helpless in the face of Kami-sama's power.*

Hina and Sanji both stared up at it, while Nami gaped in terror, her eyes wide and desperate. "That's the same kind of attack Makino and I saw!"

"No shitty act of God is going to hurt a lady while I'm around," Sanji shouted, leaping into the air.

Conis gasped, reaching out an ineffective hand. "No, Sanji-san, don't!"

Ignoring her, Sanji bounced up higher and higher toward the glowing area of the sky faster than even Hina, no novice at Geppo, could have done, showing a speed that could well have challenged that of his captain. Then he seemed to falter for a brief second as he concentrated, before cursing and flipping himself around, kicking up into the light as it finished coalescing. "Iron Leg, Anti-Manner Kick Course!" he shouted, and Hina gaped as she watched his legs, from his knees down, turn black for a few seconds.

It wasn't enough to protect him though as the attack hit him. Sanji gritted his teeth, biting through his cigarette against the scream of pain as the lightning, for it had turned out to be lightning rather than light, played across his body electrocuting him inside and out. But he had accomplished his goal. The lightning bolt should have been the size of several of the larger Wavers around them, but Sanji had disrupted it with his launch into the air. That was no help for Sanji however, who thankfully now fell unconscious collapsing back down towards the ground smoking and sizzling, his eyes rolled up in his face.

"Sanji-kun!" Hina was in motion before the lightning had even started to dissipate, but even so, Nami beat her to it, catching Sanji before he could smash into the pier below them, gently setting him down. "Oh, Sanji-kun, that was so brave but..."

To her surprise Sanji stirred as she held him, grimacing but looking up at her, his eyes almost turning into hearts at the sight of the amount of under-boob he could see from this angle, but his pain stopped him from enjoying it as much as he would have otherwise. "Ugh, I, I'm still here, Nami-swan. More importantly, are you and Conis alright?"

"We are fine," Nami said, shaking her head. "You just rest there; we'll see to your wounds."

Staring at the damage the cook had taken, Hina shivered, feeling honest fear for the first time in a while as she began to have an idea of what they might be dealing with here. "Lightning," she whispered shaking her head. "One of the Logia types that can profess to be unbeatable." *That isn't good at all, not good at all.*

She had some knowledge of the six techniques, but her ability with Busoshoku was minimal at best. The only one on the crew who could possibly fight a logia user was Luffy perhaps, and she wouldn't want to bet money on that. "So, this is what their God is," she said coldly, shaking her head.

"Indeed," McKinley shouted, moving up to them as he looked at Sanji in surprise, not just at his survival but his earlier act. The man, in fact, looked rather shaken, as if his world view had taken a severe beating. But despite that, he continued on. "You Blue Sea dwellers might still be able to leave if you are quick about it, Kami-sama doesn't particularly care if you live or die. But Conis has now crossed a line. She, a Skypiean, has betrayed Kami-sama, speaking of his laws to outsiders. She will be punished, and if you keep her with you, she will bring Kami-sama's wrath down on you too."

Hina scowled, gesturing around her to her marines who were once more forming up having scattered earlier. Now under her glare, they were looking a little sheepish, a little respectful of Sanji when they looked at him, and a lot fearful, as they stared up at the sky above them, wondering what that had been. Hina thought briefly she should be a little more understanding of their cowardice, after all, against that power, cowardice could truly be seen as a survival trait.

She set that to the side though to glare at McKinley. "Who do you think you're fooling! This was obviously a trap from the first! We leave, and we will suddenly be faced with threats from your God, perhaps even forced to go to this Holy Land place on your terms. This God of yours will not let us go."

Caught out in a lie and indeed having propagated the lie of another, McKinley didn't even try to prevaricate. "You are correct. But if you leave Conis behind, you will merely be forced to deal with Kami-sama's priests, not Kami-sama's wrath yourself. On the one hand, you might survive, some of you. If you do not leave her behind, you will all die. There is no defense against Kami-sama's power, as your fellow could tell you."

Sanji grimaced. "As much as I hate to say it, that attack broke my Busoshoku as if it wasn't even there. If that attack had continued, it would have killed me." He pushed himself to his feet shakily, pushing Nami away to stand on his own, still smoking feet, "But I won't even let us think about leaving Conis-chwan behind."

"Then might I offer a solution?" a new voice asked, bringing everyone's attention up and to the side of the docks. There flew the Knight of the Sky, the old man in the full plate armor and the pink-polka dotted bird. "I heard the cry for aid, and so I appear," he went on with a barely discernible smile through his beard. "But while McKinley is correct, bringing Conis along would be dangerous for you, there are places beyond the touch of Enel."

"Enel?" Nami asked while Conis and many of the other Skypieans, including McKinley were staring at the old man, hope, fear and a lot of other emotions visible on their faces.

"Ah, that would be the current Kami's name," the old man said, smiling somewhat bitterly. "But that is not the point right now. The point is, there are places out of his reach and I can take Conis to one such. I will even return and take her father with me soon."

"I..." Conis seemed to shake, then nodded her head firmly, moving out from where she had been standing beside Nami and Sanji. "I will go with you, K, Gan Fall-san. Thank you."

"No thanks are necessary my dear, this is merely my role as Knight of the Sky," The old man replied, something bitter in his tone to Hina and Nami's ears.

They didn't say anything though, watching as Conis made her way over to the bird-turned-Pegasus getting on behind the man with a sigh, leaning her head against the back of his

armored shoulders. It looked as if, whatever else, the young woman trusted Gan Fall almost implicitly.

Sanji took some comfort in that as his legs finally gave out and he stumbled, causing Hina to grab him and then order several of her marines to look after him. Gan Fall looked at Sanji, raising his lance in token of respect. "I thank you for aiding young Conis here, but you all must start your journey now. Whatever trials await you will not be as bad as incurring Kami's wrath further. If fate decrees it, however, you will win through and we can see one another again. Farewell!" with that he sent his steed high into the air and away, leaving the two pirates and the marines behind.

Around them, the locals had all retreated further and now the entire wharf area seemed deserted. Hina took this in and made a point to look around for McKinley wanting to smash him one before they left, before sighing, realizing they really did need to leave. *I suppose a chance to survive is better than none, after all.* "Fullbody?"

"Yes, Captain Hina! I have found the most seaworthy vessel and it is indeed somewhat provisioned. If we are able to get away from these priests we should be able to get down to the White Sea at least," Fullbody reported, saluting. Behind him, the marines were already untying a large Waver ship, about the size of a schooner like the Resolve, but with lower sides and no cannons. It had a single over-large mast, but it was obviously just for emergencies given the large set of Breath Dials at the back of the vessel. At the prow was a carved image of a giant angry red bull.

"Let's go then," Hina said, gesturing Nami to join them. Nami did so while wondering how her own crew was faring. She didn't have long to wonder about that however, as, the moment the Waver had begun to pick up speed, there were two clunks from either side of the vessel. She turned from where she had been steering to stare at the claws that had just latched onto their vessel.

Hina raced to one side while Fullbody did the same to the other, bringing his steel-encased knuckles down in a blow that would have caved in wood. But he howled as his blow bounced off the shrimp's armor, wringing out his hand and cursing quietly. "What in the heck is this thing made of?"

Hina encased the top portion of the claw in one of her handcuffs before she tried to pull up, not breaking the armor but trying to break the shrimp's grip. As she did, she looked behind their new ship and sighed, releasing the technique. "Is that a long line of these same kinds of shrimp behind us sergeant?"

The oldest of her marines nodded, moving to the stern and popping open a looking glass. "Yes ma'am, it goes as far as I can see too."

"And are those angry asterisks I can see on the faces of those first few?" Hina asked.
"Hina incredulous."

"Yes, they are," Nami said for the sergeant, shaking her head. "And I'd wager that has something to do with the rest of my crew. Pissing people off is something of a Luffy-specialty."

"In that case, I doubt we could get away from them at all. Damn it. It looks as if we've no choice but to try to survive whatever judgment these priests attempt to force us to do. Hina pissed off," Hina cursed.

An instant later the ship was lifted out of the water and the shrimp under them started to zoom along far, far faster than even a schooner could have moved at full sail, throwing more than a few marines off their feet. Nami and Hina moved to the prow, staring as ahead of them the distant mound of the Holy Land began to grow. The speed of the journey got so bad that Hina had to lock them all down, but at least that kept them all from flying off.

The speedy journey of the bull ship, which none of the Marines had bothered to get the name of, ended as abruptly as it began. When Nami finally looked around, they were stuck on a ziggurat of some kind in the center of a small lake. There was one entrance to the lake directly behind the ship, a steeply inclined river made of Island Cloud, with dozens of sky shark fins flashing around in the water. All around them, the jungle loomed.

"Ah, I see, we are a sacrifice then. This system I suppose would be to imply piety or something in the Skypieans who convince us to put ourselves in a position the shrimp can capture us?" Hina mused, standing up and throwing her hair back rubbing one hand down the chest of her maroon officer's uniform, then into a pocket, picking out a cigarette from the box Sanji had given her.

"Allow me, mademoiselle," Sanji said, moving through the marines to hold out a flaming match.

"Thank you Cook-kun," Hina said with a smile, noticing that the cook had somehow recovered from his earlier electrocution. That implied one of two things: either the lightning had been far weaker than she had first thought, which was unlikely, or Sanji, and therefore the other Straw Hat Pirates, were a lot tougher than she had thought. *Since I just saw him use Busoshoku, no matter how poorly, it would be best to just go with that thought.*

Setting that aside she nodded at Sanji then turned as they both took a drag from their respective cigarettes, staring all around them.

"Wh, what should we do captain?" Fullbody asked, while around them the marines pushed themselves to their feet or stared at the four corners of the top of the ziggurat. In each corner, a pole thrust toward the sky, all of which were adorned with several skulls dangling

from long ropes worked through their eyes. The effect was frightening, and more than a little scary.

Nami looked around too, shaking her head. "Well, so long as Sanji is able to get a rope over into those trees, I guess we can... just leave?" she asked, looking over at Hina.

Hina nodded firmly. "Hina agrees. We don't need this ship really, so it is best to leave this place and force the enemy to come to us on the move. Even if the enemy knows the jungle better than we do it can't be as bad as being stuck out here in the open with no way to retreat quickly."

"Hai, captain Hina!" shouted the marines and, Nami was irritated to note, Sanji too. A second later Hina and Sanji had hopped into the air, carrying two long ropes made up of all the ropes they had on the ship. The marine captain then created two more long chains of interconnected handcuffs to hang next to the two ropes. They then joined the others back on the bull ship.

Fullbody grabbed one, and with the marines and Sanji looking on, nodded firmly. Every man there nodded back, then he took a deep breath and leaped forward swinging away from the ziggurat, a yodel coming from his mouth. "Ahaaaaaahaaaaahaaaaahhhhh!"

"Yes!" yelled some of the marines, while others clapped and one, the sergeant shouted, "Well done LT, that's the way!"

Hina blinked, shaking her head, looking at Nami and wordlessly gesturing. "Don't look at me," Nami said, crossing her hands. "I've no idea what's up with that."

"Oh, Nami-swan, but you have to yodel when you swing like that in a forest. It's both traditional and cool," Sanji said, grinning at the ladies over his cigarette.

Both Hina and Nami looked at him blankly then shook their heads and turned to watch as the rest of the marines began to follow Fullbody across. Each man shouted out his own war cry as he did, causing Hina's eyebrows to start twitching, as Nami just shook her head slowly. Soon they were all across taking with them packs of food, their few remaining guns, and the cutlasses and daggers they had been given from the Resolve's armory and the ones they had taken from the White Berets. None of them had taken any of their Dials, not understanding how to use them, but they were still decently armed for all their travails of late.

Hina and Sanji hopped over to join the other marines, with Sanji, his eyes having changed into hearts, carrying Nami. Once they were all once more on terra-firma or the wood equivalent, Hina looked around them, frowning in thought. "Where to go from here, I wonder..."

Nami however pointed directly up from where she was still in Sanji's arms. How he had recovered so quickly was beyond her, but she wasn't about to ignore it. "Let's get the lay of the land first. Something about this..." she gestured down at the Ziggurat, "Something about it is sparking in my memory."

Hina looked at the pirate navigator and sighed. With all their current issues, the idea of splitting off from the pirates just no longer made sense. She was worried about the long-term ramifications of that, but for now, she was willing to ignore that in favor of using Nami's uncanny navigator abilities. "Lead the way."

For a time, the marines, Sanji and Nami slowly made their way up into the trees. While Hina dealt with this easily, a mix of Geppo, pure endurance and her Bind-Bind Fruit making the climb a relatively easy thing for her. Nami got out of Sanji's arms soon enough, and she too seemed to take the climb in stride, only nearly falling a few times to be saved by Sanji who, despite his earlier encounter with God's wrath, was able to deal with the jungle easily enough. In fact, both pirates were grinning, Hina was amused to note. Sanji's was a genuine sign of pleasure, while Nami's was a sort of rictus thing, but the navigator still pushed on.

Hina's marines, on the other hand, were not having a good time. Many of them were still, despite her training earlier that day, not used to the air up here, and were far weaker for it. Others simply lacked her endurance, and so she had to fall back and help them occasionally, including Fullbody.

"What is keeping you going?" Hina asked looking at Nami as the troop took a water break. "I know you don't have that much more strength than my marines, but every time you nearly fall, you just keep going."

"Heh, well my captain might have had a point earlier. Adventures like this, they're why we came to sea in the first place, in my case to map out islands like this. And while I don't exactly like having my life threatened every time I turn around, at least no one's actively trying to kill us right now. That just makes this a fun jungle exploration, even if the trees are just too freaking huge to believe!"

"Right," Fullbody said, gesturing. "I mean, look at the trunk of that one fallen tree over there..."

Fullbody fell silent as there was a rustling noise and what everyone assumed was a tree, which had fallen onto its side, began to move, twisting this way and that, as a giant head made itself known to one side. The thing looked like a python, but it was just huge, as in, it looked as if it could gulp the ship they'd just left without having to swallow. Its eyes were heavy-lidded, almost sleepy looking but they sharpened as it spotted the marines below it, opening its mouth and hissing.

"You were saying?" Hina asked, chains beginning to appear around her hands as she stared at the giant snake.

"Ugh, me and my big mouth!" Nami said, before turning and shrieking as she ran away from the snake, which surged forward towards the marines.

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Zoro found himself wrapped around by string that Shura had just set on fire. He grimaced in some pain, but pushed through it, lashing out at the next fireball with a barely formed air pressure attack with Yubashiri before twisting around to kick off a branch and hop through the air to attack Shura in turn. A series of engagements later, Shura again deflected one of Zoro's blades to the side, reaching through his defenses to his chest. "Tekkai!" Zoro growled, right before the Impact Dial went off.

He grunted, but that was about it, and Shura had to dodge wildly to get out of the way of the attack. The man's face and eyes widened, as he fell back, feeling a small runnel of blood dripping down from one cheek.

This was how the battle had gone from the instant both sides started to take one another seriously about five minutes ago. While Zoro could tank blows, he wasn't the type to do so without responding, and Shura's Mantra was incredibly good allowing him to dodge practically every attack Zoro tried. He flew around the fight, using his bird as if the bird was an extension of his own body. Occasionally the bird would use the flamethrower attack from his mouth, something that Zoro wondered about the mechanism for. But more often than not, it was lance against sword, with Shura's greater speed and agility in the air offsetting Zoro's greater skill.

In return, Zoro was too tough for the priest to put down with his Impact Dial and his string had also proven ineffective. The man still tried to use it occasionally, and Zoro would slow down and take a punch or a blow from the Lance before breaking the string and returning one, forcing the man to retreat, having seen in his Mantra that even a single clear hit from Zoro's Santoryu would end him. That knowledge, that despite the fact he seemed to be winning he could not land a final blow, seemed to be frustrating Shura no end.

As Luffy watched, he slowly started to notice that. "Shura is losing it," he said aloud. The others looked at him quizzically, and he waved them off. "Just trust me on this, he's getting frustrated with the Impact Dial and how Zoro is simply taking every blow from it and continuing on. "

"What does that mean for Zoro?" Makino asked though she had a good idea.

Luffy shrugged. "He doesn't have much of a choice. With string countered by strength and not able to use it freely without some setup time and his Impact countered by endurance and Tekkai that means he only has his lance as an offensive weapon. But Zoro's a better weapon's user, and the whole Santoryu style can give anyone issues, much less someone like him, who's so dependent on his beast for air travel and... hmm, honestly doesn't seem to be all that flexible in his thinking, if not in his abilities."

Robin made an interrogative noise, and Chopper asked, "What do you mean?"

"In combat, you need to be able to roll with the punches, and I don't mean just your opponent's attacks, but the overall battle, any setbacks or changes to the environment and such like," Luffy said with a shrug. "Shura, he came into this fight all arrogant, and hasn't quite recovered from the shock of his string not working."

"Perfectly understandable," Makino muttered, shuddering. Luffy had freed them all after doing the same to the ship, then dropping the anchor. Both women, and Chopper too, had been utterly helpless until Luffy had broken them out, none of them having the strength or durability to break out on their own.

"Yeah, maybe. But on top of that, his style is based on what he calls Mantra giving him warning of incoming attacks. But Zoro's change in style to a more instinctual style, one that relies entirely on reading Shura instead of Zoro's own attacks, has thrown him off."

Sure enough, in the next few moments, Zoro too noticed a change in his enemy's attack. He stopped trying to use the Impact Dial and continued to try to use the lance while scowling angrily. That was good since Zoro was starting to feel the continual punishment from that weapon. *Good, now to see if I can somehow take that bird out of the fight.*

However, that brief moment of attention on the bird was enough to give the priest Mantra a hint as to what he was up to and he smiled grimly. "Trying to target Fuza?" he asked shaking his head sorrowfully. "It must be so irritating to be so weak that you have to search for such a weakness. Still, never fear, I will put you out of your misery soon."

Anger roiled within Zoro and he slowly canceled his Geppo technique, coming to land on a nearby branch. When he spoke, it was with a certain amount of malice aforethought. "You seem awfully quick to call me weak, but I'm not the one who's been kissing the ass of this 'God' dick. Or should that be kissing God's dick?" he quipped, sneering.

"You know not of what you speak!" Shura shouted, his temper fraying again. "Enel-sama is Kami-sama, he is unbeatable, all-powerful and all-seeing. Repent sinner!"

"Hah!" Zoro said, crouching down and thrusting his swords out to both sides. "No one is unbeatable you ass, not you and not your God." As he did so, his will started to manifest around him, not in the form of Haki, but as a strange, ghostly image of some kind of animal, perhaps a demonic jellyfish or something similar. At the same time, steam actually began to rise from his swords, making them seem to waver in the air to the watchers.

"Enbima Yonezu Oni Giri!" Zoro shouted, zooming forward. He sliced forward with his swords like in a normal Oni Giri attack, but instead of being a direct, easily discernable attack, his swords wavered almost multiplying in the air as they crossed in front of him.

Despite the way this attack seemed to multiple Zoro's blades, Shura was still able to block most of the slashes. He even returned one, the attack planned out just enough to let him see it coming. But the effort to this took all of his skill in Mantra, overloading it almost at last, which was what Zoro had hoped. Because of this, he missed the way Zoro had closed until it was too late, because he hadn't closed directly with Shura, but instead had gotten below him, aiming at his bird. The final attack, a horizontal slash from Wado Ichimonji, sliced into the bird, cutting it in half from beak to tail.

"Damn you!" Shura roared in rage and grief, leaping off his dead mount as the pieces sloughed off one another. Bouncing off a nearby tree. The next instant he came at Zoro's intent on impaling him in the chest. This time he was too quick, and Zoro was slow to recover from his previous attack and the priest finally managed to get a clean hit without Zoro being able to activate his odd variant of Tekkai. "Burn!" the lance activated, burning Zoro at the point of impact. "Die for your sins against my lord Enel and for Fuza!"

But to his shock, Zoro didn't die, he didn't even scream. He simply grimaced, his eyes blazing under his bandana as he stared back at the man. "Is that all? Is that the extent of your life, serving this God of yours? Sorry, but my dream is bigger than that. No way am I going to die here." He raised his blades and, as the man pulled back his lance to thrust it in harder, shouted, "Tatsumaki!" spinning in place. He spun so fast he created a tornado, a tornado, with the wind going so fast and 'sharpened' in a way so much that it sliced through the metal of Shura's lance.

Shura gaped as he pulled back his lance fully to try to use it to defend, only to watch as the attack sliced into his lance, bisecting it like the lance was made of dry wood. "Impossible, how, my Mantra failed, my how..." He didn't have time to try and figure out what to do or even how this had happened because Zoro's attack kept going, Sendai Kitetsu slicing into his body before Wado Ichimonji took his head from his shoulders.

As the body of his enemy fell to the jungle floor in front of him, Zoro sheathed Sendai Kitetsu and Yubashiri then pulled his damp bandanna off his head before sheathing Wado Ichimonji and patting his new scar on his chest, the heat of his enemy's lance having seared the wound partially shut shaking his head. "These angel-looking assholes have some weird

abilities," he said aloud, looking over to the ship, "but their ability to take damage isn't up to our standards."

"Meh, that might be true, but I still prefer not to get hit if I can help it," Luffy said jokingly although his eyes were serious as he gestured for Zoro to come back to the ship. "But that fight showed that we can't be complacent, the 'God' here might not be the only threat, and his own threat level may well be a hell of a lot higher than I expected, if a guy like that one is so convinced of his superiority. For now, you should let our Doctor take a look at you before he has a complete panic attack."

"That's right you crazy bastard!" Chopper shouted, bouncing up onto the railing. "Every hit from that Impact Dial probably did internal damage! Each shot might not have mattered much alone, but the accumulation is bound to have caused issues, no matter how tough you are!"

"Can't you praise me for winning first before going all worried old woman on me Chopper?" Zoro grumbled, making his way over to the ship, as Robin tossed him a line.

"Congratulations on winning, Zoro," said Luffy with a laugh, before both women said, "Now go get yourself seen to by Chopper," also laughing at him lightly.

Grumbling under his breath, Zoro did so, while Luffy turned his attention to the body of Shura, frowning thoughtfully.

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Those present on the Resolve didn't realize that everything that had occurred had been seen from afar via the Mantra of the Enel, the man who was called Kami by the locals. Now feeling the death of one of his priests he began to laugh wildly, shaking his head as around him his attendants watched in some confusion and fear. What a magnificent show these Blue Sea dwellers put on, and I know that the barbarians will take advantage of it too. Yet, work is finished on the Ark. Yes, yes I think yes!

"We will have a festival!" he said aloud, startling many to twitch, as that had been the first thing he'd said in over thirty minutes. "Send for my priests, oh, but don't bother sending for Shura, he isn't in a position to answer. Oh, and send for my chief enforcer as well. We will begin preparations for a giant game. A Survival Game to be held here in Upper Yard!"

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Aisa shivered suddenly, breaking away from where she had been forced to learn needlework, racing over to Laki, who was making bullets for her rifle, taking the specialized resin-coated nuts of a tree and setting them in a long row as she carved them into the appropriate shape for her rifle. "Laki! Something happened! Something happened!"

"Calm down Aisa," Laki said, shaking her head at the little girl's excitement. "What's happened?"

"One of the priests, he's dead!"

"What!? What do you mean one of the priests is dead!?" the older girl shouted, garnering attention from nearby warriors who were also preparing for their next raid. Soon Wyper was called along with his officers, and Laki gestured for Aisa to talk.

"I sensed one of the priests fighting someone on the Blue Sea dwellers, one of the stronger three, one of the ones who glow brighter than normal people in my Mantra, while another one of the stronger ones was just looking on for some reason. But, but the Blue Sea dweller won! The priest, I think it was Shura, is dead!"

Wyper's eyes widened, then he began to laugh. "Perhaps, if you put two problems together, they cancel each other out!" he shouted aloud as he looked around at his Braves. "Tonight, we attack in earnest, leave everything but your weapons behind. This time, we will not retreat, we will keep attacking until I take Kami's head!"

He was answered with a roar as the warriors of the clan prepared themselves for total war.

End Chapter

Hmm, I don't honestly think Shura and Zoro's fight is my best work, but I think it showed how the crew and their own skills match up against the Priest's generic abilities. Regardless, since we have now entered the Sky Island Arc in truth, this story will remain in the monthly polls until it is finished. If you want to have more say in what I update per month as well as access to the next twelve chapters of [Making Waves](#) and other patty on only content, please

consider signing up over on my patty on page. Hope you all enjoyed this and be on the look-out for my monthly poll to be up by late tonight. It will run until the 15th.