

I don't own either canon and can't draw.

As I said, this is the first of a few chapters in this story you'll be seeing over the next week or so. We'll see how fast I can beta-read them, but RL has been irritating. This has been betaed by Michael, Hiryo and myself.

Chapter 6: Where There's Smoke, There's Irritation

Within East Blue was an island. It was larger than most, but not overly important on its own. Rather it was what was based on that island which was important. For on this island was the headquarters of the East Blue branch of the Marines, a massive tower of white with the marine banner flying high above it.

At the top of this tower was a room paneled in wood, with banners of each branch of the marines operating in East Blue on the walls. At the front of the long room was a massive banner with the phrase, 'Absolute Justice,' written on it in large letters. In front of this banner was a long table, around which currently sat the commodores and captains that together made up the leadership of the marines in East Blue, sharing cups of sake. Only a few of these men, the strongest and longest serving, had been trained at the central branch, but even so they were more than enough to keep order in this ocean. Most of the time, anyway.

"Hmmf. It's a damn travesty, that is what it is, Arlong and Krieg both taken out by another pirate! Admittedly with Arlong our hands were somewhat tied, but still Krieg and his armada attacked marines just as often as civilians with his damn dirty tricks. It should have been us who brought the so-called pirate admiral to heel," Groused one officer, a past middle-aged man with a scar running down one side of his face.

"True, but it wasn't. We need to deal with the here and now hence the bounties on this new pirate crew. I'd like to hear the reasoning behind the size of those bounties however," said another man. His words were directed to a tall man with tanned skin who was currently wearing glasses, despite being inside, with a captain's cloak and rank tabs.

"Hai. Then with your permission?" the man replied, standing up and looking at his superiors and equals. They all nodded and he moved around the table, directing their attention to the bounties in question as he pulled back a few of the banners. The bounty pictures were on the wall behind the banners, larger than normal so both the pictures/photos and bounty amounts were visible to everyone in the room.

"First of all, we did not go by Captain Nezumi's words alone when we posted these bounties. His report started us looking into it, and it was only after we did so that we discovered that the same pirate who killed Arlong had also killed Don Krieg. Why, or rather how the Great Schemer Gin escaped we don't know, but we are willing to think it was a mistake or oversight rather than part of some long term plot."

The captains all around nodded and the man in question went on. "From the report on Krieg's death, we learned the Pirate Hunter Zoro had dueled Hawk Eyes Mihawk. Questioning the prisoners we took off the Baratie's hands we learned that Roronoa had somehow earned Mihawk's respect and had joined this pirate crew, hence raising his bounty to the amount shown here."

The man in glasses stopped speaking for a moment, letting the other captain's talk amongst themselves at that. A swordsman earning Mihawk's respect in this, the weakest of oceans, was practically unheard of. Any crew he joined would be one to watch, though more than one there wondered about why a renowned bounty hunter, one who had earned the name 'Pirate Hunter,' had become a pirate himself.

When the murmuring died down the man went on. "From there, we then went back to Nezumi's reports on what happened to Arlong. We have all known about Arlong, though of course we had to hide our agreement with the Knight of the Sea to leave him alone from the lower rankers, hence Nezumi's mission and a few others sent into that area. The loss of a marine crew here or there was seen as acceptable to keep Jinbei on the side of the World Government."

Many of the captains had to grit their teeth at that, but the man went on unhurriedly. "Needless to say, Arlong's death will need to be forwarded to Jinbei, and while we will take credit for it in East Blue, no onus can be placed on us for breaking the agreement."

"At any rate, from there we learned that this one"—Glasses gestured to the first of the drawn pictures—"was the one who assaulted Nezumi and his men." He coughed delicately. "We had to resort to questions along the pirates' route to put together a portrait of this pirate. His name is apparently Sanji, no last name known. The chefs at the Baratie were of particular help putting his portrait together do to some sort of long-standing grudge. Despite his assault on Nezumi however, he seems to be of less importance than Zoro or this new crew's captain."

"The haki user," One of his listeners, a captain, growled. "I presume the report on that was substantiated?" The man in glasses nodded, and everyone around the table scowled. "Then the amount for this Straw Hat Luffy makes perfect sense. Still, three new powers rising in East Blue, all at the same time?"

"Three? I would not count the one called Sanji as a power himself," the man in glasses cautioned.

"I wasn't talking about Black Leg Sanji. I was talking about the bounty huntress Ranko."

"Ah, Red-haired Ranko." The man in glasses nodded understanding.

"According to the last report we have from base 17, Ranko hates that title saying it links her to Yonkou Shanks. So we've stopped using it," another man said almost absentmindedly, scratching at his chin as he thought. "Hmmm... I wonder if we could somehow find Ranko and send her after this pirate crew. A user of the Rokushiki against a Busoshoku user? It would be an interesting battle certainly."

His eyes hardened and he looked around the table. "On a similar topic, what are we going to do about Buggy's rampage? Wiping out an entire base of marines and a few helpless civilians cannot be overlooked."

"Agreed. I have to say that from their apparent skill level Monkey D. Luffy should be worth more, but this Luffy hasn't killed any marines, and Buggy, as you say, apparently massacred an entire base. So regardless of his previous below-the-radar acts, we feel he has earned the 75,000,000 shown here." The man in glasses replied.

Somewhere else in the wide ocean of East Blue, a certain clown felt as if someone had just walked over his grave.

"We must stop these pirates in their tracks **now** before they become any more of a threat to the world," said a man who sat at the head of the long table. He wore the cloak and rank tabs of a commodore, and was somewhat broader across the shoulders than any of the others. "We must stop them now, for **absolute justice!**"

OOOOOOO

The day after the crew found out about their bounties via seagull, Luffy rounded up the crew for a long overdue discussion. They all sat around him near the tiller, as Makino manned said object. Luffy looked around at the others, his lips quirk-ing slightly. "Alright, I know I've been saying for a while that I would talk about something called Haki, and I figure now's as good a time as any. I called it manifest will once after I had my...episode after Mihawk put Zoro out of commission."

"I've been wondering about this for a while. You said my ability with Kami-E might lead into one type of Haki, and then you mentioned two names for your own abilities. Busoshoku and Haoshoku." Nami said, her eyes narrowed.

"In simplest terms, Haki of all types is will made manifest: bringing out your life force, your will, to effect your physical body and the world around you," Luffy began.

"Oh my God captain! You're sounding like an actual teacher instead of just shouting 'Dodge!'" Nami exclaimed, shaking her head before becoming serious. "Okay, and there are three types right? Can anyone learn them?"

"No, only two types can be learned, though only if you have enough willpower to begin with, and even then your ability in them will vary wildly. For instance, my skill at sensing Haki, which I think you'll be a natural at, Nami, is somewhat limited. I'll leave Makino to explain that. I, however, can use Armor, Busoshoku haki, very well."

Luffy held up his hand, and suddenly it was coated in a shiny black substance. "Zoro, slash at my arm the strongest you can. But not with your white blade, with one of your disposable ones."

"Heh, disposable swords. I really need to upgrade," Zoro muttered, before standing up and pulling out one of his, as Luffy said, disposable swords.

"You're going through those so fast even if you don't find upgrades you might want to buy a bushel of them," Makino remarked. "That's your fifth set since we left Conami behind, isn't it?"

Zoro grunted in the affirmative before slashing forward, his sword a blur to everyone there but Luffy, a booming sound crashing out an instant later. Zoro had put enough strength into that blow to cut deep into the wood of the ship.

But instead of cutting through Luffy's arm and continuing on, a sharp retort of shattered steel was heard and Zoro let go of the hilt of his blade with one hand to catch a sliver of metal as Nami dodged a few more and Makino did the same, while Sanji kicked one sliver away. "Wow Zoro, you really didn't hold back!" Luffy laughed.

Zoro chuckled too, but then Sanji was in his face. "Oy, shitty marimo! What would you've done if those slivers had hit Nami-swan or Makino-chan, ehrrrrh!? How much of your blood do you think I'd have to extract to make up for your marring their perfect forms, ehrrrrh!?"

"Sanji-kun, focus please?" Nami said sweetly, though her teeth were showing almost as if she was as much a shark as the corpse formerly named Arlong. As Sanji backed away from Zoro she turned to Luffy. "So Armor haki does just that. Can it be overcome?"

"Usually only by someone wielding Busoshoku of his own, or if the attack is strong enough to overcome the user's ability in it. You can armor weapons just as well as your arm, if you have a...spiritual connection, I suppose you can put it, to the weapons in question. I would wager Zoro could eventually figure out how to do it with that white blade of his, but the others, not so much..." Luffy laughed, as did Zoro. Both of them knew that he did have a connection to the white blade, the symbol of his promise to Kuina, but the others were about as worthless as bars of iron.

"Hmm... How long do you think it would take us to learn this?" Sanji asked, drawing on his cigarette and letting out a calming breath.

"No clue," Luffy replied bluntly. "I learned it over the course of a few years, but I didn't have an actual trainer worth the name during that time, just the vague idea it existed and seeing it in action once. However, learning the Rokushiki is a major step in the right direction to Busoshoku and Sense, or Kenbunshoku, Haki."

"Kami-E and Soru for Kenbunshoku, Tekkai for Busoshoku?" Nami guessed, narrowing her eyes. "Okay, then what about that pressure thing?" She shuddered slightly remembering the odd force that Luffy had let loose, the amount of power he contained within him. It was comforting now to know he had such power under control and ready to wield if need be, but at the time it had been eye opening, to say the least.

"The King's disposition: Haoshoku. That type can't be learned, though you can build up an immunity to it if your will is strong enough," Luffy said with a grim nod. "It's only found in select individuals, though how or why some people are chosen and some are not is beyond me to explain. I know Ji-kure didn't have it, whereas Shanks did, but in every other way I'd say Gramps was the stronger of the two."

"Shanks would cry if he heard you say that," Makino said mildly before shaking her head. "But I'd have to agree with it."

"Anyway, I intend to train you all in the Rokushiki, which should, as I said, lead you into developing your haki. I want all of you to know at least two of the Rokushiki, your choices as to which, before we get to our first Grand Line island. I should also be able to feel when you're ready to move on to haki, at least the armor kind, though that's more guesswork than I'd like. Sorry Nami, but Makino and I don't have as good a grasp of Kenbonshoku haki as we do Busoshoku."

"That's fine, I suppose. I can figure out how to build it up myself once I get Kami-E down to the point where I don't have to concentrate on it," Nami shrugged. "But saying that, I've been getting the impression since we first met that you two know some things about the Grand Line?"

Luffy waved to Makino who took over from him. "We do, since we both asked Garp and Shanks about it. First of all, navigation works differently there..." Makino went on from there to explain the oddities they would be facing on the Grand Line.

Through it all Nami scowled, making notes on a piece of paper she had pulled from her bodice, a sight that made Luffy flush and look away for a moment, though Nami didn't notice. "I suppose if the islands are so different, then their having separate magnetic fields makes some sense, and then of course those differing systems would

interfere whenever they overlap, creating conflicting weather patterns and ocean currents. It shouldn't be possible, but I can understand it... Reverse Mountain, hmm... Theoretically possible too..."

She trailed off, a look of excitement on her face as she thought of the major navigational challenges they would face on the Grand Line, and Zoro for the first time realized why Luffy had been so certain Nami was the navigator for them. Any normal navigator would have discounted Makino's words, or perhaps been unwilling to face the challenge ahead of them. But Nami was willing to take on that challenge, just like Zoro would have any person attempting to take him on with a sword in their hands.

After a moment, however, Nami looked up from her notes at them all. "I realize we've already talked about this captain~," she began, smirking as Luffy visibly twitched at the teasing tone in her voice as she used that title, as she had been for the past few days. "But we really need to sell the Bastard. We just can't handle this big a ship in the tornadoes and other types of weather we're going to face in the Grand Line. A schooner would be ideal, or perhaps a sloop, though a schooner would serve better given we might eventually add more people to our crew."

"That's why I said we would be buying a new ship in Logue Town. Though even then, don't get too attached. I've been saving most of our money so we can buy a good ship eventually on the Grand Line from one of the islands that specialize in ship-building." Luffy explained.

"OY!" Nami exclaimed, shooting to her feet and pointing at Luffy angrily. "That's my money you're talking about there!"

"Not all of it, most of it's mine. Captains get the biggest share of the loot," Luffy teased a smirk on his face, the same Sautome style™ smirk that had driven his rivals crazy and the girls at Furinkan to blush, though he hadn't bothered noticing the second aspect at the time.

Nami grumbled, looking away with a faint flush on her face which thankfully no one noticed. She really wanted to argue, but couldn't when Luffy smirked at her like that. "That is so unfair," she grumped half-heartedly.

"Not really," everyone else said in unison, even Sanji. *Ugh, I guess I really am in the wrong here, but all that money...* With an effort of will Nami banished the pout

from her face, staring at Luffy. "So new ship, right? But what if we can't buy a ship in Logue Town that meets our requirements?"

"Then we steal one," Luffy replied with a blasé shrug. "Pirates, remember?" Everyone, even Nami, laughed at that.

Two days later, the ship sailed into the port of Logue Town. It was a somewhat large port for East Blue, with an equally large marine base set to one side of it, but pretty open despite that. As the *Bastard* sailed in the crew saw several ships scattered around the port. A few were large freight haulers; two were passenger liners. A few of them were smaller yachts, resting near the shipyard set to the opposite side of the port from the marine base.

"Well, we're here captain," Nami said as the ship came to rest against the wharf and Sanji and Zoro tied them down. "What are your orders?"

"GAHH, okay just stop it! That is so damn creepy whenever you say it Nami!" Luffy shouted, whirling on Nami and throwing his hands up in the air, before pointing at her irritably. "Especially since if you didn't agree with my orders you'd just ignore them."

In reply Nami pumped her fist. "Yes! About time. I'd have thought you'd crack days ago." Luffy pouted at that while Nami simply giggled. The two of them had taken to teasing or joking around with one another like this ever since leaving Cocoyashi, with Nami greatly enjoying her newfound freedom from the shadow of Arlong and of being able to be herself around her crew without restraint.

Now she became more serious. "Still, what should we do? With the marines having such a strong presence we should be careful and quick. Despite the pictures of you three being rather horrible, the odds of one of you being recognized is probably high. I'd say we should only spend a bare day here just in case, unless we want to make trouble here?"

"Nah, no point in causing a ruckus unless we have to. But I do want to see the execution tower, the one where Gold Roger was executed," Luffy replied, his voice becoming equally serious, his eyes shadowed by his straw hat, yet still somehow glowing with excitement. "I want to see the place of the beginning and the end. The end of the Pirate King, and the beginning of the age of pirates."

Nami shivered at the words, both the phrasing and the amount of import Luffy was able to pack into them. "W...Well, I would say the execution platform would be set somewhere near the center of the town, but I can't help you more than that without looking around myself first."

"Let's sell the Bastard and get all of our items stored somewhere, then check out the local shipyard before anything else," Makino interjected.

"Leave that to me Makino-swan!" Sanji said, twirling up out of the galley. "I know more than a bit about ships and selling them. Carne and I used to have to sell the ships of pirates who made trouble at the Baratie."

"Well in that case that's all on you Sanji. Though if it's a woman, I'm making Makino take over," Luffy said with a laugh.

The others all laughed too, even Sanji who acknowledged that that was probably a good plan. They made their way to the shipyard and came back with an inspector. After much haggling on Sanji's part, the man wrote them a check for a measly 2,000,000 beli for the *Inglorious Bastard*. Being very top heavy it did not have the best design, and the sailing system was too man intensive for any but the largest crews to make the best use of.

After that, the crew stowed their gear, including Nami's tangerine trees, in one of the town's warehouses. From there, though, the crew began to split up, wanting to put off buying a ship for now. Zoro was the first. "I need to look into either buying some swords in bulk or finding some better quality blades for myself."

"Oh, that'll no doubt be expensive, Zoro-kun," Nami said, making a beli sign with her fingers. "I could be convinced to give you a loan you know..."

"None of that, Nami. Remember, you're **not** the ship's purser, so it doesn't matter to you how much money it takes. Besides, Zoro gets a cut from the bounties we took after he joined, especially that one sword-using guy, Gojunk, Lassgrab?" Luffy looked over at Zoro as Nami backed down, once again pouting at not being in control of all that money.

Zoro shrugged ignorance, and Makino handed over around a million beli, which should be more than enough to buy two good swords. "Now don't get lost, Zoro;

I really don't want to have to search for you later," she teased, causing Zoro to flush angrily before he snatched the money out of her hands and stalked off, the green-haired girl's laughter ringing in his ears.

The two women left next, eager to go shopping and see the sights. This left Sanji and Luffy to walk together for a time until Sanji got directions to the town's food market. As he made to turn away, though, Luffy called him back. "Wait a second Sanji, I've got something else I want you to look into buying."

Sanji paused listening as Luffy told him, then shook his head. "You know if you don't want to be called captain Luffy you might want to stop planning ahead like that."

Luffy laughed, smirking at him. "Well, I'm all for always playing by the seat of my pants, but I don't think Nami or Makino would appreciate it as much."

"True," Sanji replied with a laugh before waving his hand in a lackadaisical manner, turning away. "I'll look into it, captain." With that the two of them parted ways, with Luffy making his way to the center of the town, as Sanji moved off toward the eastern portion of the town.

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For several hours Zoro simply wandered, too prideful to ask directions as he searched around for a store that sold weapons. He stopped, however, as he heard some kind of commotion to one side of the street, more a back alley that he was currently walking along. Moving in that direction he stared at... "K-Kuina!?"

The girl he so addressed had the same short-cut blue hair as his old friend/rival, and even the same facial features, though this girl's hair was perhaps a shade lighter in color. She was also wielding a sword against two random thugs as he watched. She dealt with them easily enough, then seemingly tripped as her glasses fell off her nose.

Zoro, still in a daze from the utterly bizarre resemblance, bent down to pick the glasses up, holding them out as if they were made of glass. "Er, here."

"Oh thank you," the Kuina clone replied, and Zoro sucked in a breath, thankful beyond words that her voice, at the very least, wasn't like Kuina's. She slipped the

glasses over her nose, peering through them at Zoro. She frowned momentarily as if she almost recognized him. But thankfully for Zoro she didn't seem to, instead turning her attention to the two men she had just knocked out. "I'm always so clumsy right after I use that move, I wonder why?"

"That's because you're overextending between your attack's last step and your recovery," Zoro replied promptly. "That sword of yours isn't your real sword; its added weight is throwing off your footwork."

"Oh, that makes sense. Ah, but does that mean you're a swordsman?"

Zoro simply nodded, now somewhat uncomfortable at having spoken up so quickly and desperate to change the subject. "Erm, I don't suppose you could give me directions to a weapons' store could you? I need to replace my sword." Zoro didn't want to outright say he used a three sword style, after all who else but 'Pirate Hunter' Zoro used Santoryou? And the Kuina-lookalike had already almost recognized him in any event.

"Oh, um yes, I can show you the best store in the city; I even have business there myself." Not noticing Zoro's sigh the girl turned away moving down the street expecting him to follow. "By the way, I'm Tashigi. What's your name?"

"Roronoa," Zoro said, unwilling to lie to a fellow swordsman but also not saying his first name which was much more well-known than his last.

Tashigi nodded, asking Zoro about his training and what kind of swords he used, seemingly excited to talk shop with another swordsman. Zoro could relate, somewhat. Luffy wasn't a swordsman despite his apparent skill with the weapon, and while sharing a lot of the same beliefs, didn't really understand why Zoro thought different swords styles, swords, and other things of that nature were interesting.

The two of them kept talking until they arrived at the store. There Tashigi quickly walked up to the man at the counter, an older man with what was rather strange, clown-like hair in Zoro's opinion. "Excuse me, do you have my sword ready for me yet?"

But the man had no attention to spare for her, instead staring at Zoro's waist. He was about to shout and attack the man for staring at him like that, but then he realized the man was looking at the one sword Zoro had at his side at present rather than at anything else. "Th...that sword!"

Ignoring Tashigi, the man quickly came running around the counter, almost making to grab the white-hilted blade from Zoro's waist. "Hey mister, you wouldn't happen to be in the mood for selling..."

He backed up as Zoro's eyes darkened along with the rest of his face, though when Zoro spoke it was a simple statement of the way the world would be that made the man nearly shake as the power of it hit him. **"NO."**

"Oh my gosh!" Tashigi said, having come up behind the rather rude shopkeeper and seemingly not effected by Zoro's tone. "That sword, how did I miss it? It has to be a named blade!" Before either man could say anything, the girl had pulled a small, well-worn book out of her pocket, flipping through it until she seemed to find the picture she was looking for. "Ah, here it is. Wado Ichimonji, one of the O Waza-mono blades, one of the 33 greatest blades in the world!"

"Wado..." Zoro mused, pulling the sword free of his belt and holding it lengthwise in front of his face pulling the blade out of its sheath for a moment. Both of the other people in the shop stared at the perfection of the blade, the wave visible along its edge, but Zoro ignored them. Instead he tried to, as Luffy had described, push his will out into the blade saying softly, "Nice to know your name at last, Wado Ichimonji."

For just a moment Zoro felt it, the spirit of the blade. Wado's spirit wasn't vocal or outgoing, but it was deep and powerful, like an ancient piece of granite, unyielding to anything, yet welcoming to its owner. Zoro felt his lips twitch into a smirk, and he clicked the blade back into its sheath, staring at the girl and the shopkeeper. "Not for sale," he said firmly. Pulling out the wad of bills he placed it on the counter. "Where are your best swords?"

The shopkeeper stared at the money then up at the swordsman before looking back to the sword at Zoro's side before shaking his head. "Um, any of the swords on display by themselves are good, but I don't have any blade up to that level!"

"True, there's no way a blade like one of the 33 would be sold in a shop like this, or indeed in a shop at all. They are all works of art one and all, they even make my own Shigure seem normal in comparison." Tashigi nodded, still staring at the sword in Zoro's hand before visibly shaking herself as he moved off to examine the blades. "Speaking of, is it ready yet?"

"Hai, just come this way," the shopkeeper muttered, still staring at Zoro even as he walked away. This was why he was the first to notice Zoro had turned away from the swords on the wall one hand still holding Wado. Zoro stopped however by the bargain bin, which was full of cheap swords, the likes of which he'd been destroying three or even four pairs of per day since leaving Coocoyashi. "Ahh, wait!?"

Zoro didn't wait. Instead he set Wado back on his belt and reached down, pulling out a sword with a reddish brown hilt capped by a gold guard and pommel, and a reddish brown sheath marked by gold clasps and a gold cap. He stared at the hilt for a moment before pulling out the blade, examining it intently.

Behind Zoro, Tashigi gaped at the sword instantly able to tell that its quality was far more than the bargain bin it had been in would have indicated. "That sword... No doubt that's a mistake that it's in the bargain bin! I know I've seen that blade before..."

Before she could open up her little book again the shop owner shook his head. "That sword's not for sale! My wife must have put it out again, but no one who knows swords is going to buy it and I won't be a party to murder by selling it to anyone who can't tell it's..."

"Cursed," Zoro said calmly, turning the blade this way and that. Like Wado, the sword was a thing of beauty, with a white edge and a blue-tinted hamon that resembled flames.

"Y...yes. Its name is Sandai Kitetsu, and like all the Kitetsu blades it's cursed. How can you..." the shopkeeper stuttered.

"I could just feel it."

The shopkeeper gulped, regaining some of his control. "W...well then you can see why I don't want to sell it," Beside him Tashigi nodded, looking at the sword warily now.

Zoro held up the sword, smirking at Kitetsu for a moment as he set its sheath down. "How about this then, we test this sword's curse against my luck?" With that he threw the sword up into an arc to one side of his body, holding his arm out underneath it.

"Are you crazy!? That blade's edge is the real deal! You're going to lose your fool arm!" the shopkeeper shrieked, as Tashigi gasped, her eyes wide behind her glasses.

The sword flipped in the air making a 'whoom, 'whoom' sound as it went, but instead of cutting Zoro's arm off, the blade just barely missed cutting into his upper arm, missing his arm by so little Zoro could feel his little hairs moving under the wind of the sword's passage. The sword then sunk deep into the floor of the shop, burying half its length into the floor as if the wood was butter.

Zoro grinned, a devil may care grin that did nothing to hide its equally dangerous edge. "I'll take it."

As he turned he saw Tashigi fall to her rear, staring at him and the blade he now carried in shock. The shopkeeper however had a look more approaching awe. Before Zoro could ask how much Kitetsu cost, the man turned, racing into the back of the store and returning with a sword, setting it onto a stand. "Sir, it has been years since I have seen a real swordsman come into my shop. I beg of you to take this blade too. It's my own family's blade, but none of us have been able to actually wield it in generations. Its name is Yubashiri."

The Katana in question was a high quality blade, though not as high as Kitetsu or Wado. It was also slightly longer, and had a slightly less pronounced curve to it. Zoro could tell its quality the moment he pulled the blade, which had a black hilt with a gold cross-guard and pommel, out of its equally black sheath. Looking at the shopkeeper, Zoro shrugged. "I gave you a million beli. Is that enough for both?"

"Under normal circumstances, no, not for both. But in response to your courage sir, I will gladly sell you both swords for that price!" the man said, actually bowing so much he nearly slammed his head into the counter next to Yubashiri.

"Then I'll take them both, with thanks," Zoro said, and without another word clipped both blades to his waist. Carrying three blades once more made Zoro smile and he turned away quickly. "Thanks for showing me this place, Tashigi." With a final nod directed to the girl, Zoro left the shop. As Tashigi watched, astonishment gave way to confusion when the sight of three swords tried to jog her memory.

After a second, however, she pushed herself to her feet, rushing out after Roronoa, who was standing at the end of the road, looking around as if he was confused about where to go. "Wait!" she shouted. As the green-haired man turned to her she asked quickly, "How... That is, how did you know Kitetsu wouldn't cut you?"

Zoro looked at her, seeing more of Tashigi the person this time rather than the Kuina look-alike. Even so, looking at her was still damn irritating and he turned away quickly. "I didn't, I was just willing to try."

"Wh, why?!" Tashigi gasped. "I, I mean, I know Kitetsu is a magnificent sword, but to willingly put a limb on the line for it is, well it's crazy!"

"Heh, not the first time I've been called that," Zoro laughed, still not looking at her. One hand came to rest on Wado's hilt, and he smiled faintly. "Do you have a dream?"

Tashigi blinked then nodded slowly. "Yes, I, I want to reclaim all the Named Blades in the world which have wound up in pirate hands. None of them are worth having such magnificent swords!"

That made Zoro's eyes narrow and he turned to look at her full in the face once more before smirking. "Nice sentiment I suppose, though that's far too broad a label for me to like. After all, until you walk a mile in a man's shoes, who are you to tell him he's wrong to take to piracy?" As Tashigi seemed to puff herself up in outrage, he went on. "To answer your question, I have a dream. And if I wasn't willing to put my life on the line, let alone a limb or two, how the hell would I ever achieve it?"

The conviction in Roronoa's voice silenced Tashigi's outrage at his comment, and she stared stupefied as he walked away. By the time she recovered, Roronoa had turned a corner, and was gone from sight.

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Nami smirked, placing another dress aside as she and Makino left a clothing store giggling to one another. She and Makino had **very** different views on fashion, but they had a similar idea on how to have fun with poor clothing store owners. This being the first time they'd been in a large enough city to have a shopping district they had indulged. The two of them had left a trail of sobbing men in their wake after trying on literally everything in each store in turn.

Walking arm in arm the two of them moved down the street, but then Nami pulled them both to a stop, twitching her head to one side as she overheard a snippet of conversation. "I tell you while business in the shipyard might be down, the city has never been safer since Smoker-sama arrived last year."

"My husband doesn't like it; he's been forced to lay off half his workers. But I have to agree, I can do with a little less money in the bank in return for peace of mind."

The two women exchanged a glance. "Have you ever heard of this Smoker guy?" asked Nami.

"Hmm... I can't say the name rings a bell, but it shouldn't be a problem, unless he is a Vice Admiral." Makino shrugged. "The people of that rank and above are not only stronger, but have a wider skill set than those below, and would be much harder to deal with. I will admit this Smoker's perfect record worries me though."

"Then we should find the others and get out of here as quietly as possible. We don't need trouble," Nami replied, looking around them and after only a few seconds making unerringly for the food market.

"Nami, has Luffy ever struck you as the type to run from trouble? We'll deal with it if the marines come after us. I think you need to get over this idea of running away all the time." Makino said in a surprisingly firm tone of voice. "I know why you built up that mindset, but Zoro and Luffy are not the type to do so, and Luffy is our

captain. He might listen to your worries and even act on them, but he is also far more likely to pick a fight than you seem comfortable with."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Nami grouched.

Makino might have continued the discussion but Sanji's voice interrupted them. "Nami-chan, Makino-swan! You've come to look for me; I'm so happy!"

The two girls turned watching as the chef whirled through the small crowd around them in his usual extravagant manner. Nami leaned in to whisper in Makino's ear. "You know if we ever run into a female marine we're screwed, right? She'd bat her eyelashes and suddenly Sanji would turn on Luffy and Zoro."

"Personally I have to wonder if he's trying too hard to cover another kind of interest," Makino replied dryly, causing Nami to first gape then collapse laughing to her knees.

Sanji helped her to her feet but when he asked what she had been laughing at Nami could only wave him away, still giggling. Makino however came to her aid, asking Sanji, "What is in that small box Sanji, the unlabeled one."

Sanji was currently wearing an overlarge pack about three feet wider than he was on top of being taller than his waist if set on the ground next to him. Under one arm he held several boxes carrying various spices and smaller ingredients, each box properly labelled except for the one Makino had noticed. As Nami moved away from him Sanji rearranged the bundles in his arms before shaking his head in something like amused respect. "Ah, that is proof that our captain can at times plan ahead."

"Now I'm interested," Nami replied, reaching out to take the box from Sanji as Makino, despite his protests, took some of the other boxes. The three of them then made their way down the street toward the wharfs and the warehouse in which they had stored their stuff. As they did, Nami opened the box, gasping slightly at what was inside. "Wow, an entire set? This must've been expensive!"

"No kidding, Nami-chan. Luffy gave me something like two million beli, and I spent most of it on those things. The World Government can't fully regulate them, they're too darn useful. But they can make it really expensive to own them," Sanji said as he too looked at the small box of den-den mushi. Most were of a size to be carried

in a pocket, paired to each other and another larger one which took up half the box. There were also two video Mushi, Mushi which could record and send video to the larger circuit board Mushi.

Dropping off their stuff, the three of them moved down to the shipyards as Makino shared what the girls had learned of the marine presence here. Like Nami had feared, Sanji simply nodded, not seeing anything there to worry about. He wasn't going to look for a fight, but he certainly wasn't willing to just run away at the first sign of trouble.

The dockyard was somewhat busy, but to Makino's dismay none of it was actual shipbuilding. All the work going on was repairing existing ships. There were a few yachts that were the right size, but asking around none of them were for sale. They could, of course, steal one, but Sanji pointed out that none of the yachts were armed, and they had sold the Bastard's cannons with the rest of the ship.

From there the trio moved along the wharf, checking out the various ships, noticing one which hadn't been there when they arrived which looked like a pirate ship. There were a few marines on board, undoing the rigging and makes notes for some reason, while others were busy tying up the prisoners.

"Looks like the marines here are at least organized. I also see that whoever this Smoker guy is they run a tight ship. The pirates didn't have time to cause much damage," Sanji noted, dragging on his cigarette for a second, gesturing around them with the hand holding the cigarette before they passed through the marines.

"Hmmm, I don't like that. But then again, this Smoker fellow does have a bit of a reputation."

From there their walk continued, but they didn't find any ship that really met their requirements. Sanji stopped at the end of the public wharf area, staring back the way they had come before turning to look at the three ships over his shoulder. He was about to speak when he spotted Luffy, moving through the crowd to one side of the docks and heading their way. He called out to Nami and Makino, and the three moved toward Luffy, who met them halfway. Makino explained what they had been doing, and Luffy nodded before looking over to where Sanji had been before. "Hmm... Well, then we'll have to steal one of the ships that do match what we need."

As Sanji grinned around his cigarette the girls first gaped, then, in Makino's case, joined Sanji in laughing. Nami however just shook her head. "You're crazy! We can't do that!"

"Remember, we're pirates Nami. This kind of thing should be sort of expected," Luffy said with a smirk.

"I'll stay here then," Makino said, still laughing. "We might need a bit of a plan if we're going to do this after all. Can you fit most of our stuff in your ki space?" she asked, looking at Luffy. Luffy had sort of explained ki spaces the day after he had explained Haki to the crew, though only Zoro had seemed to really understand it. They had all seen it, though, so believed it was real at least.

"Yeah, I'll go do that now I think," Luffy said, standing up from the table at which they had all been sitting, having a bite to eat. "Sanji, if you've got everything, why don't you and Nami come with me. I don't want to have to put her tangerine trees or the Mushi in there just in case. No telling how they'd react to being in there. After that, though, I really do want to find the damn execution platform. I tried to find it earlier but I got turned around the moment I entered the city proper. Too many small alleyways."

"If you hurt my trees, Luffy, I'll make fertilizer out of your head," Nami growled as she and Sanji stood up. "But I'll point you in the right direction at least. Oh, but leave one of the Den Den Mushi here with Makino. That way we'll be able to get in touch with her."

"Good thinking. In fact I'll carry two of them just in case I spot Zoro," Luffy said before leading the way off.

They left Makino as they walked off, and she sighed, leaning back slightly. She was a good deal older than the others on the crew, and though fun-loving and adventuresome, Makino did like to have some time to herself occasionally. Ordering another pot of tea, she sat, pulling out a small fantasy novel to read while also watching her target. She was still there as the tramp of marching feet passed by and opportunity knocked.

Moving into the café's small bathroom she pulled out her Den Den Mushi and held it to her mouth, watching in amusement as the shell changed slightly, becoming

green along it's shell as it's face changed to look sort of like her own. "I always like watching you Den Den's mold yourselves to your owners." She shook her head then spoke into the receiver. "Sanji, Nami, I think we have an opportunity here..."

OOOOOOO

"I still can't get over what we're planning to do," Nami groused as she checked on her trees. The time in their pots stuck along one wall of the area they had rented in the warehouse wouldn't do them any harm, but it never hurt to check. When she felt a nudge she sighed, plucking a single tangerine off the tree and holding it out to Luffy as she turned to look at him.

"Why's it so surprising Nami? We're pirates. I would have thought you'd be right along the idea of stealing like this, especially from people who won't be missing it. If we were stealing from a family or something like that I'd see your point, but not here."

"We will have enough enemies as we sail the seas regardless of anything we actually do, Luffy. I just don't think we should go around making our names even worse," Nami argued. "We can find a yacht and retrofit it over time. We don't need to..."

"Nami," Luffy said seriously, setting the tangerine down gently on the top of one of Sanji's boxes as he was busy working over a clipboard of some kind. Sanji looked up, scowling but not saying anything as Luffy gently rested his hands on both of Nami's shoulders. "You're worried about the WG and marines coming after us more seriously than they would otherwise for a group of rookies if we go about doing stuff like this. I understand that. But you need to understand that it is only a matter of time until that happens anyway. Not only because of the skills we all already have, but also because of our dreams. The WG likes the status quo, and none of our dreams are good for that ideal. Not even yours."

"What? What do you mean **my** dream!? All I want is to make an accurate map of the whole world! What's wrong with that?"

"The whole world part, duh." Luffy replied. "You can't seriously think that the world government doesn't have secret bases, islands they don't want people to know about, secrets out there hidden because no normal navigator can find them. Or are

you just going to let challenges like that out of your perfect map? Or an accurate map showing the route to Raftel, a place they don't want anyone finding ever again?"

Nami growled at the very thought of besmirching her dream like that. Her map would be of the whole world damn it! Then the implications of Luffy's words sank in and she paled. "You...you mean if anyone learns what I'll be doing, I'll be seen as just as dangerous as you and the others?"

"That's right," Luffy said softly, realizing that actually hadn't occurred to Nami before this. While odd, he thought it was somewhat understandable. but she needed to realize that going forward. "The best you could hope for would be that the WG would capture you then put you to work for them instead, though even that is doubtful."

Luffy then smirked that smirk of his that set Nami's pulse to racing for some reason. "Besides, you told me this Smoker guy's been here for a few months. If he's good enough to have the reputation he does, then he could have done something to help Cocoyashi. Think of making trouble for him like this as a bit of payback."

"Hah, you should have led with that baka," Nami replied, looking away. "Alright, I understand your point, but I still need to think about it. I mean, I've spent my life trying to run away—to keep my head down. The idea that my dream is still going to paint a target on my back... That will take some getting used to."

"Just remember at the same time that you've got me, Sanji, and the rest of the crew here ready and willing to not only help you achieve your dreams, but to protect you as you achieve them," Luffy said, looking over at Sanji who had stopped what he was doing to listen in. "Right?"

"Of course! Nami-swan, don't worry. If anyone threatens even a hair on your head I will destroy them utterly!" Sanji declaimed grandly as he swirled over to her bowing gallantly.

"See?"

Nami laughed, flushing as once again Luffy smirked at her before turning around and helping Sanji load up Luffy's ki space. She remained there, watching them, a warm, happy feeling filling her as the two men joshed around as they worked. The

warmth banished the feelings of concern, even fear, which Luffy's words had invoked. Nami realized she would need to think about Luffy words more later but she also knew he was right.

Moments later Nami gave Luffy directions to the execution tower, having picked up the layout of the city almost absentmindedly as she and Makino rampaged through its dress shops. Nami, however, stayed in the warehouse with Sanji, leaning against one of her trees and thinking about what Luffy had said, and what it probably meant for the long term. Sanji, perforce, stayed with her, pulling out a cookbook from South Blue to read; enjoying himself as he made notes in the margins making fun of the original author's cooking skills, or begrudgingly adding a positive one here and there.

They both looked up as Makino called them on the den-den mushi. Hearing the other woman out, Nami smiled, throwing off her concerns and worries for now. Since she was a naturally non-combative individual they would come back to her, but right now looking out into the sky and feeling the wind from the open window, Nami had an idea. "Sanji-kun, why don't you go grab that cart? I'll meet you there, but I have some things I need to do first."

OOOOOOO

Thanks to Nami's directions Luffy had found the execution platform quickly, having taken to the rooftops. Crossing the courtyard around the platform, Luffy climbed up the side of the thing as fast as any monkey, not wanting to advertise his ability to use Geppo unless he had to. Standing on top of the platform, Luffy stared around at the city and the ocean visible beyond. "Not a bad view, though I wouldn't like it to be my last," he murmured, taking his hat off his head.

Luffy looked around for a few moments, ignoring the shouting of some official or other below ordering him to get down. Having finished taking in the view, Luffy held his hat against his chest, bowing his head humbly as he remembered the man whose life had ended at this place.

This was why he didn't notice the marines arriving until a gruff voice from right beside him spoke up. "Oy, brat. You the one called Straw Hat Luffy? You don't

look like much. What is the world coming to when a little punk like you has a bounty of 65,000,000?"

Luffy turned, and despite the other man's words was able to look him in the eye. The other man was older around middle-aged at least, with close-cropped, naturally grey hair and a thick cigar in his mouth billowing smoke. His face was stern, his shoulders wider than even Zoro's, and he had an overall look of strength underneath a customized marine uniform. He also had a jutte, which was an old-fashioned police baton, the size of a broadsword hanging from his back.

"You must be Smoker. I've heard of you. And is the straw hat my only memorable feature? I mean, come on, man. Devil-smirk Luffy maybe, or Blue-eyed Luffy, that would go with my cook's label. Something clever, not obvious," Luffy groused, shaking his head while replacing his hat, and turned to the marine fully. "Don't suppose we could hold off on this could we? Only this place does sort of have historic importance, and I'd rather not be a party to wrecking it."

Smoker looked around them too but then turned back to Luffy, his eyes hardening. "While I might agree with you there, I'm afraid I can't just let you go, not even for a few seconds. Not so long as you're a pirate, and I'm a marine."

"Oh, you and your superiors seemed fine with letting Arlong alone for years and he was a pirate?" Luffy said, smirking insolently at the other man even as his own eyes sharpened noticeably. "Funny that, or did you get a share of Nezumi's cut too?"

In a flash the jutte was off Smoker's shoulder and leveled its blunt end like a sword point toward Luffy. "I don't know this Nezumi, and I would never stoop so low as to accept bribes! Now come along quietly or I'll take you in by force."

"You mean you'll try, Smoker," Luffy said, still smirking. Then he was gone, and a fist passed through Smoker's head as it turned into smoke. A second later Luffy stood behind Smoker's previous position watching as the man's body dissipated into smoke. "Ah, so your name's not just a comment on your smoking habit. This might be tougher than I thought."

A second later he dodged Smoker's fist as it came out of the smoke like a rocket propelled by that very smoke. Leaping into the air, Luffy ducked under and around more punches, his Kami-E aiding his already high ability to dodge.

However in return he couldn't tag the logia user and Luffy's lips twisted as his fist smashed into the top of the execution platform with enough force to shatter it. "Now see, this is what I was talking about!"

Below them, several squads of marines had moved in, taking up position at each entrance to the courtyard around the execution platform. Others were on the rooftops, their guns trained on the action occurring on top of the platform. In charge of all this now that Smoker had closed with their target was a young woman that Zoro would have recognized.

Chief Petty Officer Tashigi had changed her clothing and was now wearing an only moderately modified marine uniform. Hidden near the entrance to the courtyard she was watching the contest tensely, worrying. She and Smoker had moved out of their base the moment word reached them that someone somewhat matching the bounty picture was seen in town, putting together a decent plan on the fly to catch Monkey D. Luffy whatever he tried.

Neither she nor any of the marines noticed that they in turn were being watched by a group of cloaked individuals from further down on of the main streets leading into the courtyard. "What should we do captain?" asked one of them, staring at the fight.

The one he addressed seemed to be slumped in place, muttering to himself. "Years of keeping my head down, trying to stay out of trouble and now this! 75,000,000! And they don't even know about my past! No, it's because of that flashy bastard Kuro! I should have left him alive to at least take the fall, but no. All those marine deaths are being put on my shoulders instead. If he was still alive I'd flashy torture the fool for this!"

Another cloaked individual, her figure obviously feminine even under her all-encompassing cloak poked the captain in the side. "Enough of that Buggy, what should we do?"

That seemed to nudge Buggy out of his stupor. He glared around, noticing the number of marines, the fact that a few of them seemed to have special munition launchers, and worse, that Smoker was a logia type. "It doesn't seem as if our target's

here, so we watch and wait. Send the crew back to the ship. Get it ready to leave. Regardless of anything else, we can't spend any more time here than necessary. Not with that...that flashy fucking bounty on my head! The three of us will stay here for now until those marines all get involved. By that point we should be able to tell who's winning. Maybe we'll get to see a flashy death; maybe we'll see Smoker get smoked. Either way, stepping in does us no good right now."

Back on top of the platform, Smoker was becoming more impressed the longer the fight went on. While Luffy obviously couldn't do anything to him, the pirate's ability to dodge and move even in midair was incredible. His use of Kami-E and Geppo was masterful, beyond any actual marine Smoker had ever seen use it, and he even knew some Soru. Tekkai, of course, wouldn't have helped the pirate much, but Luffy seemed to know that, dodging instead of trying to take any of Smoker's punches.

"You're good, Straw Hat, very good. It's a pity you want to be a pirate. You could have made a great marine!" With that Smoker attacked again, driving Luffy backwards.

Luffy flipped away before using Soru to dash to the side and down, landing on the ground near Tashigi as he stared up at Smoker, who was slowly bringing his body back together again and moving down towards him. "Nope, I wouldn't make a good marine. I prefer following my own brand of justice rather than orders from murderers and slavers."

"Excuse me!" Tashigi barked from nearby, shocked at that accusation into speaking and breaking her cover. "How dare you talk about the World Government like that!"

Smoker said nothing, knowing all too well what Luffy was talking about. Instead, he simply attacked, unwilling to let Luffy demoralize his sergeant.

It didn't work. Even as he dodged around, using Geppo and his mastery of midair combat, Luffy was still able to answer the female marine's shouted question. "Does the Human Auctioning House ring a bell? Or the fact that the Tenryubito own slaves, and can order anyone killed for any reason they want, regardless of law? Or how about what happened to Fuchsia Island a few years ago, when hundreds died in a

bombardment ordered by the king because he wanted to get rid of the Grey Terminal so he could impress a visiting Tenryubito? Huh?!"

Luffy ducked under one of Smoker's fists, slipping up and over a jutte strike before pulling it out of the other man's fist in a show of strength that took the marine aback for a moment. Before Smoker could recover, the end of his own jutte struck into the smoke that his body had become, and suddenly that segment of his body was solid. Smoker grunted in pain, his smoke forming into his physical body once more, then attacked again, his form flowing forward from everywhere at once.

Some of his kicks and punches got through now that he was above Luffy, but not many, and in return he had to be on the watch for the end of his jutte. It was obvious that Luffy had figured out that the jutte had seastone built into its tip.

But that wasn't Luffy's only offensive attack. "Rankyaku!" With that Luffy shot out several dozen winds blades, not only from his feet, but from his hands. Some of them didn't do much damage, only pushing through Smoker's smoke form to destroy much of the courtyard and the execution tower which crashed down behind Smoker.

But others were **sharper** somehow, and when they intersected his smoke form Smoker actually felt some pain from them. He backed away, reforming for a moment and rubbing at a few bruises that appeared on his physical body in reaction to the attack. They were small, but they were still there.

"Heh, I bet your post here is the same sort of thing. I bet you were ordered to remain here whatever you heard, no matter what pirate was out there making trouble. And like a good little dog you obeyed Smokey. That's really sad." Luffy said, continuing to use his Saotome-style taunting attack.

As Tashigi stared at Luffy white-faced and the marines all around her glared at this pirate scum daring to preach at them Smoker turned to them and barked. "What are you waiting for? Get him!"

Before they could attack Luffy, however, Zoro arrived on the scene from behind the marines along one side of the courtyard. "Tatsumaki!" He roared, lashing out with the tornado of air and sending first dozens then over a hundred marines flying to land in heaps. "Yo Luffy, is this a private party?"

"Meh, doesn't seem all that selective a party, Zoro," Luffy replied, then dodged to one side as Smoker charged him again, his stolen jutte slamming down into the man's hand with bone crushing force.

Smoker howled in pain as his fingers were crushed under the blow, and was unable to dodge the Rankyaku that caught his head. Thankfully his head was still semi-smoke, so he was only smashed backwards, head ringing from the blow, and hand in pain.

Tashigi turned, putting aside her questions about what Luffy had said. Never having served anywhere but in East Blue, she had no idea about the evils the Tenryu-bito did, let alone allowed, so his words had come as a major shock to her system. But the sight of Zoro allowed her something to concentrate on. "YOU!"

As Smoker and Luffy clashed once more behind her Tashigi charged Zoro, lashing out at him as he cut down a few of her men. Later she would notice that Zoro hadn't used the edge of his katanas, only the blunt side, but right now that failed to register. "You, you are Roronoa Zoro?! I should have known, damn it. Did you think it was funny to hide your identity from me when we were at the shop earlier? I swear I'm going to take those swords from you; you're not worthy of them!"

"I never lied about who I was. I even told you my first name." Zoro replied calmly, using Yubashiri to block her attack. He could feel the bloodlust Kitetsu held, and had already run into trouble stopping it from turning in his grip to bring its cutting edge to bear on his opponents. But there was no need to kill these weak marines, they weren't worth the effort. So he used Yubashiri instead. "And as for my swords, I think I showed I was worthy of them and I paid for them too. Unless you're talking about Wado, which you'll only take from me if you can pry it out of my cold, dead fingers."

For a moment the two of them danced around one another as the sky darkened above them. More marines joined in one or the other battle only to get smashed aside by Luffy and Zoro so quickly they proved no help whatsoever.

Smoker found his own jutte smashing into him every time he tried to coalesce into a man shape, but the pain from the continued Rankyaku attack was such that he had to back away occasionally. He was now bruised from head to toe, his breathing ragged. And Luffy looked as fresh as he had at the start of the fight.

With a snarl Smoker shouted, "White Blow!" and covered the area around Luffy with smoke attacking him from within it.

But still Luffy's use of Rankyaku and Soru allowed him too much mobility for Smoker to deal with. Then Smoker felt his jutte's end smashing into his forehead, and Smoker lost control of his powers, reforming completely into his human body and falling to land with a crash onto the cobblestones below.

He tried to get up off the ground but a kick to the side of his head laid Smoker out. He was left to stare up at Luffy, who laid the end of his jutte down on Smoker's body. Smoker could feel the now too familiar impact of seastone on his body, weakness flowing into him from the point of combat. "I win Smokey."

As that battle came to an end and more bystanders came out of hiding from behind the marine's former defensive lines to watch the goings on. Tashigi seemed to realize that Zoro was toying with her. "Damn it!" she screamed. "Take me seriously!"

"I am taking you seriously. I just don't want to kill someone who helped me find my new swords, that's all," Zoro replied, his voice still calm. After fighting Luffy for at least half a day ever since they had gotten the Bastard back in Orange town, fighting Taghigi and her troops was nothing.

"Liar! Then why aren't you using the edge of those swords?! Is it pity, or are you looking down on me because I'm a woman?! I am a swordsman too damn it!" Tashigi shouted.

At that, Zoro lost his cool. Within two seconds he had downed the rest of the marines around him and had pressed Tashigi backwards, locking blades with her, overpowering her, and then nearly disarming the marine sergeant before suddenly pressing her back into a wall, staring at her from a foot away, her hands pinned over her head. Gathering his self-control as he stared into her stunned eyes, he tensed, moving backwards for a second, though the tip of Yubashiri was still pressed into the wall right next to her neck.

"Look," he growled. "I am not taking it easy on you, but I have no wish to kill everyone I cross blades with! That would make me a simple murderer, not a swordsman. As for you, GAH!" He suddenly turned away, his sword coming away from the

wall next to Tashigi as he whirled around, shouting up at the sky. "You, this is some kind of joke isn't it? Well fuck you, God!"

Tashigi stared for a second, but got over her shock quickly, reaching down to where Shigure had fallen out of her hand moments ago. Before she could pick it up however Zoro had turned back, pointing at her in a mixture of anger and bafflement. "Listen up! I can't stand your face! Your face is exactly like an old friend of mine who died, and you even say the same sort of things she used to! It makes dealing with you irritating as hell! Just stop talking like her damn it, and for that matter do something about that face!"

"Wh, how dare you! It's not my fault I share your old friend's face!" Tashigi gasped, smacking Zoro's hand away. "My thoughts and my opinions are my own I'm not some doppelganger or something of your dead friend! I'm my own woman!"

Both of their attentions and the attention of everyone else turned at that to the battle between Luffy and Smoker as Smoker's body slammed into the ground. Tashigi made to race forward as Luffy placed the jutte against Smoker's chest, but Zoro held up Wado blocking her path. "Enough. This battle is over."

Luffy looked around the marines scattered everywhere, shaking his head as he looked down at Smoker, smirking at him. Smoker glared up at him. "I won't beg pirate. Finish it."

"Why would I do that? I don't kill unless I have to Smokey, and besides, you might become an interesting challenge sometime, if you stop relying on your logia power too much. Get stronger and come after me again." He snorted then, looking away. "Besides, this day's going to be bad enough for you later; I don't need to add to it now." He looked over at Zoro. "You done, Zoro?"

"Aye, captain," Zoro said, smirking as he moved over to join Luffy, and glancing back at Tashigi. "That goes for you too, you know. If you want me to 'take you seriously' then put in the effort to get better and find me again. I'm always up for a challenge."

Tashigi watched Zoro open mouthed as he moved to Luffy, staring down at Smoker before Luffy leaped up landing on top of the wreckage of the execution tower. Luffy stared around, noticing how many people were now looking at him from around

the courtyard and beyond down the various streets leading into it. Smiling he cupped his hands and shouted in the loudest voice he could. **"I am the man who will be the next Pirate King!"**

Every marine there felt their jaws dropping at the sheer mind-numbing confidence (or arrogance) it took to say something like that here in Logue Town. Smoker gaped up at him, seeing the wide, beaming smile on Luffy's face as he said those words, remembering the smile Gold Roger had worn as he was led to his death. He couldn't believe someone else would declare himself the king of pirates like that here of all places, in the shadow of the execution platform no less.

At the foot of the execution tower, Zoro grinned at his captain as he dropped down, landing lightly and reclaiming the jutte from his first mate. Luffy looked down at Smoker and then around him. "If you want a rematch, find me in the Grand Line, Smoker. Or don't, and see if you can find your own sense of justice somehow. Maybe make up for backing murderers and slavers. That's up to you." Luffy grinned then, holding up the jutte. "But I'm keeping this toy. A trophy, you could say."

"Wh, damn you Straw Hat, guh!" Smoker grunted as he tried to get up. But his body refused to respond even after Luffy had removed the seastone from his chest, his wounds taking their toll. "You better believe I'll come after you. I'll never rest until I bring you to justice!"

Luffy laughed, shaking his head. "Maybe if you knew what that word actually meant, Smokey, I'd be worried. Later!" With that Zoro and Luffy left, taking to the skyline and leaving behind a furiously brooding commodore and a very confused and angry sergeant, not to mention all of their unconscious subordinates scattered all around them.

Nearby, three figures in cloaks continued to watch, with one of them actually chuckling as the other two stared in somewhat bemused admiration. "So cool..." said the shortest figure.

"Hmm... Well, if we want our revenge we need to catch that swordsman unawares. I'd like nothing better than to attack him, but Logia types recover damned quick. If we attacked Zoro and his new captain, Smoker would arrive soon after to stop the fun. Besides, we need to think up a way around Straw Hat's abilities first."

"Agreed," The womanly figure replied. "Let's head back to the ship. If we can attack him at long range we might have a better time of it, especially with our Long Nose here." She turned without another word, leading the way as the shorter of the trio laughed and began to brag about his skills. The woman was not listening, however. *Pirate King, hmm? Now that is a dream and a half, isn't it?*

As they moved through the town, Luffy looked at Zoro. "So, you showed up just in time. Did you plan that, or did you get lost?"

"Bah, nothing of the sort. I just...found myself at the right place at the right time. It's not my fault the roads moved around when I was trying to find the wharf," Zoro said, scoffing.

Laughing aloud, Luffy continued to walk next to Zoro, stopping as the air pressure changed for a moment before he pulled out his Den Den Mushi. Ignoring Zoro's inquisitive expression, he spoke into it. "Makino, Sanji, Nami. Er, Zoro and I just nearly knocked out a lot of marines, so I hope you all are ready to go."

"More than ready, Luffy," Nami replied, a kind of cackle almost in her tone. "We've got everything ready and stored already. We're just waiting for you to arrive to send off some...fireworks. But we were just about to call you; there's a tornado coming in. If we don't get out of harbor soon we might be stuck here for at least another day!"

"Don't wait for me on that," Luffy ordered. "Get the ship ready to leave!"

"Roger, captain!" Nami replied, then cut the connection.

Zoro and Luffy hurried their pace, but the sky above them opened up and began to rain cats and dogs. Thunder and lightning began to pound their ears at the same time, and Ranma growled, pulling at her now wet hair, waving Zoro to follow her into an alleyway. "I am so glad we already dealt with the marines. Still, let's take to the rooftops and the alleyways just in case. Don't want to throw away one of the uses for this form just because of a bit of rain."

"Heh, the way you say that sounds so weird for some reason, but I can't say why..." Zoro mused, shrugging as he followed Ranma.

The two of them started to race over the rooftops, dropping into the alleyways only when Luffy's limited Kenbunshoku haki spotted anyone nearby. Halfway to the wharf, however, this sense caused Luffy to skid to a halt staring around her.

Seeing his captain tense up, Zoro immediately slid to a halt too, his hands falling to his swords as he tried to figure out what his captain was looking for. "What's wrong Luffy?"

"Someone's here, someone strong. His presence is almost washing out everything else I can sense, blanketing the entire damn island!" Luffy growled, shivering. *Oh kami-sama, please don't let it be ji-kure! I so do not want to have to deal with him right now!*

His captain's words had not put Zoro at ease at all, his scowl deepening as he tensed, ready for action. Despite that, however when the voice spoke it surprised both of them. "Inherited will. Though the will you've inherited is not one I would have chosen, the entire world will no doubt hear of your declaration soon enough."

Both Luffy and Zoro turned toward the voice, crouching as if for battle. There on the same rooftop as the two of them was a man where a moment ago there hadn't been one. He was tall, as tall as Smoker though not quite as wide across the shoulders and was dressed in a cloak which obscured most of his features until a lightning bolt lit up the sky. This allowed his face to be seen. It was sharp and angular, marked with black hair and tattoos down one side.

Zoro's scowl slowly dissipated, keeping one eye on the newcomer as he saw Luffy relaxing somewhat. "You know this guy?"

"Meh, just looks like some tattooed male skank to me. Sorry dude, I'm not buying, and even if I were you're the wrong gender."

"Harsh," the man replied dryly, shaking his head while another blast of thunder echoed in the distance. "I see your tongue hasn't gotten any less sharp in the years since we last met, Luffy. You would think you'd be somewhat nicer to your father."

As Zoro gaped, Luffy replied sharply. "Being the sperm donor part of the equation does not make you my father! You left me with **ji-kure!**"

Dragon paused, then shook his head, knowing what kind of training hell his father would have inflicted on Luffy. "Point. Still, my help during the Grey Terminal incident should have won me some respect."

"It did. I'm not trying to cave in your face this time, am I?" Luffy replied, shaking his head. "What do you want, Oyaji? And before you ask, no, I'm not going to join the Revolutionary Army. I might hate the WG, but that doesn't mean I'm willing to go to war with all of their puppet governments."

Zoro's eyebrows rose in surprise, but he said nothing realizing that this was both a family thing and not something he cared about one way or another. He owed Luffy his life, and had promised to follow him so long as Luffy didn't get in the way of his dream. Pirate, marine, revolutionary: it didn't matter to Zoro. The only comment he made was a muttered, "Good gods, what the hell is up with your family, Luffy?"

"I would not wish to try to persuade you again on that. I was here to see you off on your journey, not try to change your path," Dragon replied, smiling faintly, an odd expression on his stern face. "Go forth, Luffy, and make your mark on this world, both seen and unseen!"

Luffy stared at Dragon for a long moment then shook his head. "Well, thanks for that needlessly complicated way of saying good luck, Oyaji. Come on, Zoro, let's find the others. See you some other time, you tattooed manwhore."

With that the two pirates turned and leaped away over the rooftops, leaving Dragon watching them in silence, a large sweatdrop appearing on his head. "Hurtful..."

OOOOOOO

Luffy and Zoro found that the rest of the crew had begun to punt their new ship out of port. The two ships to either side seemed not to be crewed at present, and Luffy laughed as she and Zoro took to the air, using Geppo to cross the intervening distance, landing beside the four tangerine trees that had been transported onto the ship. They were still in their containers for now, but Luffy suspected that Nami had already made plans on where she wanted to put them permanently, judging by the number of bags marked 'soil' that stood beside them. Zoro quickly moved to take up one of the long poles opposite Sanji moving the heavy schooner out from between the ships to

either side, while Luffy moved to join Makino where she was readying a small antipersonnel cannon set on a small pintle mount along one side with two others.

The schooner had twelve large cannons to either side for real broadside punch. The pintle mounts could add to it, but were more dangerous when aiding in boarding actions loaded with grapeshot. Right now they were tilted as far up as they could go with all of them loaded with solid shot.

"What are we aiming at?"

"We want to shoot up the rigging of the other marine ships; that'll stop them from coming after us quickly," Makino replied, her voice nearly lost in a peal of thunder. "Nami already removed the tarps and opened up the base's supply of gunpowder to the elements. The towers won't be able to fire on us, but the ships would still be a threat if they were quick enough to catch us between here and Reverse Mountain!"

Luffy nodded, but instead of helping the green haired woman she leaped into the air shouting, "Rankyaku!" A wind blade appeared, slicing into the main mast of the galleon to one side, followed by several more all around, destroying the rigging of both the marine galleon and the schooner on their new ship's other side. Landing, Luffy smirked at Makino. "Was that what you wanted?"

"No one likes a braggart Luffy-chan," Makino said with a pout, turning away.

"Riiight, forgot you could do that," Nami said, slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand. "Guess we didn't really need to worry about sabotaging the ships more than that."

"Meh, if I was too tired from fighting with Smokey your planning would have worked just as well, gals. Don't worry about it. For now, though, let's get out of here."

The wind caught the schooner's sails the moment they were unfurled, pushing the ship away quickly, and Nami whistled appreciatively as Sanji handled the rigging with Zoro and Luffy helping aloft. "Wow, this ship handles like a dream! Even with just the five of us we can handle this ship no problem."

"I like that its armed damned well for its size," Zoro grunted. "But seriously, stealing a ship from the marines? If Smoker didn't hate your guts already he sure will now."

"An angry rival is a predictable one. Besides, I doubt any extra insult we add will matter much to the injury of breaking his perfect record. That and beating him down like I did," Luffy replied dryly, shaking her head. "Though, remind me later to do something about the mark on the sails. Sailing under false colors is against the rules even for pirates."

The crew worked on for several minutes at various tasks, moving their new ship out of the harbor. Thanks to Nami's bit of sabotage to the defensive towers' gun-powder supplies, they weren't even fired upon, and the ship sailed out of port and into the heart of the storm, riding the wind like a dream.

The storm continued for a few hours, but the crew handled it easily, and when the rain and wind began to die down they were able to let the ship have its head for a time, heading towards Reverse Mountain a bare few hours in the distance. There was something important they had to do before they reached the entrance to the Grand Line, however. It was called a crossing-the-line ceremony, a pirate tradition that went way back.

"You know, this normally involves a lot more barrels of ale and groups of the crew gathered around each. I don't think I've ever heard of a crew small enough to use just one barrel," Sanji said as he set the barrel of ale down. It was a full barrel: the act of wasting 'grog' was part of the ceremony, indicating the crew's willingness to sacrifice to achieve their ends.

"That just shows how awesome you all are," Luffy said, grinning at her crew who smirked back at her. Sanji set the barrel down near the prow of the ship, and all of them circled around it.

Makino, as the oldest there, went first, raising one leg, placing her foot's heel down on the top of the barrel. "To find Shanks and give him a piece of my mind!"

Laughing Nami went next. "To make a map of the whole world!"

Sanji smirked around his sodden cigarette, his large, metal reinforced shoe tapping into place beside Nami's. "To find All Blue!"

"To become the greatest swordsman in the world!" Zoro stated, grinning into the rain and wind, his foot thumping down onto the barrel as the others balanced there around it.

"To be the Pirate King!" Luffy set her own foot tapping down next to his first mate's on one side and Makino's on the other. "To the Grand Line!" She roared, and his/her crew replied with a shout, their legs lifting in unison to crash down onto the top of the barrel, shattering it and sending ale flying every which way.

OOOOOOO

"What do you mean, they escaped!?" Smoker snarled, grabbing the luckless junior officer who had just reported to him. "I thought you had found the ship they came in on and that they had sold the damn thing! And what the hell happened to the tower guns?!"

"The...the gunpowder for the guns was left uncovered, sir. No one knows how that happened, but all the gunpowder was exposed to the elements when the rain began," the man replied, arms flailing to either side as he tried to reply to his commanding officer despite being hoisted a foot into the air at present in the man's grip. "A, and they also stole another ship..."

"Damn pirates, they'll steal anything if it isn't nailed down. Send someone to tell the owners they'll be reimbursed when we catch up to the pirates. What kind of ship did they steal?"

"Um, it was a schooner rig sir..." the hapless man replied.

"Huh, strange. I didn't think there were any..." Smoker trailed off, dropping the man and glaring down at him. "Are you telling me that those damn pirates stole one of **our** ships, Lieutenant!?"

"I, um, I'm afraid so sir!" The man said, bracing to attention and saluting in an effort to somehow appease the trouble he saw brewing in his superior's eyes. "The ships were of course guarded, but most of the base's marine forces had been pulled

out to join in the cordon around the execution courtyard. We are still missing three squads worth of troopers even now. Those men that had been left have been found tied up and unconscious, but not injured overmuch, sir!"

Smoker snarled, shaking his head, wincing as his injuries pained him. The Rankyaku attacks on his smoke form might not have added up to much, but the injuries from his own damn jutte hurt like blazes. "Very well, we'll have to go after them, then. I refuse to let a pirate with that much skill, that much ambition, through here on my watch!"

"B, but sir, your orders are to remain on station here in Logue Town and..."

"Since when do I listen to my damn superiors about that shit?!" Smoker bel-
lowed.

"More importantly, they also destroyed the rigging on the other two marine ships in port, sir," Tashigi said quietly from the doorway. Her world view had been somewhat rattled by Luffy's words during the confrontation. Smoker's refusal to outright deny them had been telling, and she had heard of the Grey Terminal fire too, though how it had started was a mystery to her until now. While weakened by his wounds Smoker had admitted that the fire might have been started by the ruling family. The fact the pirates hadn't killed any of the marines they faced was also a point in their favor, adding Luffy's words some extra weight, to say nothing of Zoro's.

"Damn it!" Smoker howled, before puffing on three cigars at once to calm himself. "Send a call out to the nearest marine ship! Tell them to get here on the double; I'm commandeering their vessel and going after those pirates!"

End chapter

Hope you liked how the fight went. At this point remember that Smoker relies almost entirely on his logia power and his jutte. We also haven't seen the effect of Rankyaku on his smoke form, so I made it somewhat irritating and painful, but not nearly as much as losing his own jutte at Ranma's current power with the move.

As to stealing a marine ship - I've gone to some pains to show the *Bastard* was no real long term solution. I also intend to show Ranma and co. acting very differently at times. Stealing from marines and the rich as they go along is just one way of many they will be different.