

Not Oda or Rumiko.

This is for those of you wondering about Usopp, Kuro and what all goes down there. I can assure you that it is a... unique set of circumstances.

For those wondering, I will be posting the two monthly updated stories Tuesday at some point.

Once more this has been edited by myself and Hiryo. No doubt we have missed some mistakes, but I will be going back and correcting chapter 3 tomorrow based on Riniko22's review on it. If you see any mistakes, tell me and I will try to correct this chapter tomorrow as well.

Chapter 4: Dreamers Unite

Where are the Black Cat pirates?! Their ship was supposed to be here days ago, but not only has Jango not shown up, but I haven't heard anything about him or the rest of the scum!

Calm down Kuro, Kuro of the thousand plans thought, even as he went through his but their duties with his normal brisk efficiency. Think, don't let your thoughts show, consider the angles, there must be a way to salvage the plan, I won't allow the past few years of serving that little girl and her parents to go to waste!

Normally Kuro would have a backup plan, but he needed Jango's hypnosis. Without that, he couldn't convince Kaya to make him the sole inheritor in her will. *The rest of the plan is replaceable, any crew of pirates can be induced into attacking a soft target like this island, but Jango **must** hypnotize the girl into doing that. And there must be some time between the will being signed and sent to the bank before her 'untimely' demise in a pirate attack. It would look too suspicious if the girl died of the same wasting disease as her parents, especially after so long being merely sick.*

Could Jango have struck out on his own? Doubtful, it would not fit his mentality, still it is obvious something has occurred. I need more information, which unfortunately means a trip to the nearest Marine base. Jango had a bounty on him. Unless he ran into another pirate group which could overcome them, which is doubtful given the

Nyaban Brothers, he will still be at the nearest marine base waiting transport to Impel Down or the execution block in Logue Town. If he is there, I can break him out in some fashion, cause a riot among the other prisoners perhaps, sacrifice the rest of the crew to get him out cleanly. Information damn it! And a patsy perhaps.

That evening as he was serving Kaya dinner in her bed, 'Khaladore' broached the subject with her. "Ojou-sama, I wonder if you would be alright with me taking the Going Merry for a few days away from the island?"

Kaya looked up from her meal, startled. "You've never asked for time off before Khaladore-san, of course you can. But is there any particular reason?"

"I wish to catch up with an old friend of mine who serves in the marines, He apparently will be at the nearby base for a few days, as his ship is taking on supplies." Kuro lied smoothly.

"Oh! Is that why you..." Kaya faltered, looking away, casting a sideways glance at Kuro's face, which still showed the black eye Usopp had given him under the cracked lens of his glasses.

Kuro sighed theatrically, nodding his head as he expanded on the lie he had fed her easily. "Of course, that is one of the many reasons why I have problems with Usopp-kun being so proud of his father. Having a friend in the marines as well as an uncle at one point has given me a very accurate view of what pirates are really like, unlike the boy's dreams and imaginings."

"I see. I, I don't think Usopp has it in him to be a pirate at all frankly," Kaya said softly, as if by saying the words aloud she hurt her friend somehow even if he was nowhere nearby. "If he did he would've left already, wouldn't he? He's just a dreamer, but he'll grow out of it." Kaya went on, not looking as if she was as certain as she was trying to sound.

"Perhaps," Kuro said diplomatically. "But in any event, as to my question?"

"Oh, of course!" Kaya said, quickly perking up. "In fact, if you want you can take Merry with you. I am uncertain one person could sail the Going Merry alone."

"I actually thought about taking Usopp along, as a sort of peace offering as it were." Kuro said cautiously. Taking the boy would make a decent patsy, useable in various ways. And if nothing else, Kuro would also get some personal satisfaction from killing the boy and dumping him over the side like the trash he was.

"That's a lovely idea," Kaya said perking up even further and Merry smiled as well. Khaladore was truly a gentle person, this show of remorse for his part in the confrontation the day before was very welcome.

For all his skill at tall tales Usopp wasn't very good at spotting a liar. When Khaladore approached him about the idea, Usopp simply nodded eagerly, happy not only to make up with the butler who controlled how often he could see Kaya, but also to head out to sea and see what it was really like. The idea of spying on the marines, getting to know them from the inside out, was also an interesting one.

As they worked the sails waving occasionally to Kaya who had come down to see them off, Kuro smirked. *The plan is still salvageable, all I need is Jango!*

OOOOOOO

The ship called the Big Top from its former inhabitants and now the Inglorious Bastard by three out of its four current crewmen had proven to be just as much trouble as it was a help. Even with Luffy's skill at Geppo, Zoro providing pure strength, Makino manning the tiller and Nami obviously providing the mental power, operating the large galleon was still a hassle in any kind of bad weather. Twice in a week since they had dropped off Jango with the marines the ship had nearly floundered.

Despite that, Zoro, Makino and Luffy were learning the ropes quickly under Nami's 'gentle' instruction. The Orange-haired girl was not only a magnificent navigator, who had navigated them straight to the area where their first bounty had last been seen, but also a source of knowledge for all things nautical.

Despite that, they hadn't actually found the bounty they were in the area to search for, thought they had found a smaller one. Luffy shook her head as she remembered the absolutely pathetic fight said bounty and his crew had put up. "Honestly, who sticks a crab claw on his hand?"

"That was indeed very odd," Makino said, and while she and Nami moved towards the boat, smiling down at Madaka. She was a local girl who had attempted to attack them when they landed on the island thinking they were pirates here to join the group already oppressing the locals. "And his crew wasn't much either. Very rude little boys."

Luffy resolutely did not look back to where Makino had drilled a particularly lecherous person into the ground with a Haki-infused punch. She couldn't use Haki for very long, and her Observation type was actually quite poor, worse than Luffy's own. But she could call upon Armament Haki quickly if need be. And oh boy had that man paid for his comment.

Nami on the other hand had just went to town on a few of them, gleefully taking out days of irritation at Luffy's training out on her unsuspecting targets. Zoro hadn't even bothered to pull out all three of his swords, using one of the two cheap katanas the Bastard was overfull of to destroy everyone in his way.

"Why don't we stay here for a while." Zoro asked from where he was trudging next to Luffy, who had changed into a girl when they spotted the island. "We could use the greater space to spar without damaging the ship."

"You're learning," Nami said dryly dragging along a very small bag of valuables. "That would get my vote too, but we'd probably have to stay here for at least a week, the weather's shifting which means this island's going to be hammered by storms for a few days."

That small bag was the totality of the treasure Luffy would allow her to take a slightly larger bag had been left behind for the locals, though even combined it wasn't much treasure. The crab crew had been trying to build some kind of giant cannon, and had spent most of their money on transporting materials for it to the island. Not that the giant cannon in question had amounted to much, Luffy had destroyed it in a single Rankyaku. But claw-man's bounty was enough to make up for the trip out here.

The rest of the pirate gang had all been tied up and placed on their ship without any weapons clothing or food, which had then been dragged out to sea by Luffy. The pirates would be far too busy trying to survive to think about getting back to the

island, and now armed with the pirates' own weapons the people of that island would have a much better chance of protecting themselves.

"I don't think so," Luffy said with a shake of her head. "It's a nice idea, but I'd rather keep moving myself. I'd like to hunt this El Drago guy down, hopefully he'll have a ship that's more our size."

"But then we wouldn't have room to practice at all!" Zoro growled. He was learning a lot from Luffy every time they fought, but the ship really was cramping their ability to spar.

Luffy shrugged her shoulders, a smirk appearing on her face. "That'll just give ya more incentive to learn Geppo then won't it, Zoro?" She said, stepping out from the shore into the air.

Zoro growled, turning to take up position at the oars of their rowboat. He was able to use Geppo somewhat already, as evinced by the battle against the Black Cat Pirates. But controlling it, and using it for long, that was another story.

"At least you don't have to go through that stupid dodging practice," Nami growled, sitting down with Makino on the rowboat.

"You're getting better though." Luffy said then backed away as Nami turned to her, glaring at the redhead, teeth gnashing as if she was a shark waiting to pounce on her. "You are!" the shorter girl went on quickly. "When we started you could barely dodge any of the pellets, now you dodge at least six out of fifteen."

"Wow, so I can dodge a full two fifths of the attacks you launch my way!" Nami replied, growling the words as one hand strayed to the thigh where her collapsible staff was strapped.

Makino chuckled, putting an arm around the other girl and squeezing her shoulders as Zoro began to row. "Nami-chan you don't have any idea how lucky you are. In comparison to some of the ways Garp-san trained Luffy, hurling tiny pellets at you is actually quite humane."

"That thought feels me with dread," Nami said shaking her head.

Luffy ignored this byplay, turning to make her way back over the water to their ship. Once there she tied up and gagged their prisoner around the mainmast. Not only did he have a crab claw on one of his hands, he had a nasally voice, and Luffy wasn't willing to listen to it rant and rave at them.

With that done, Luffy took the time to change back to his male form, happy as always that the water attraction aspect of his curse hadn't crossed over. *The idea of me being able to stay dry while on a sea voyage would have been laughable back in my old dimension, but here I can, weather permitting. **Awesome.***

The now male Luffy frowned as he spotted some kind of smudge on the horizon, and turned as the rowboat pulled up next to the galleon. "Let's get under way quick, there might be another ship out there and I don't want us taken at anchor."

Makino raced up the rope Luffy tossed over the side, making her way quickly to the winch controlling the anchor. Nami scrambled up after her then moved toward the aft deck. Grabbing a spyglass from near the tiller Nami held it up to her eyes. "I can't see anything... wait yes, there's another sail out there just barely over the horizon."

"The wind is blowing south, southwest," Nami murmured then began to shout out orders to Luffy and Zoro, who had already begun to move the sails in the correct direction. Soon the sails caught the wind, and Nami quickly pulled the tiller, slowly turning the ship around and away from the island they had just been on.

It turned out that the ship they had seen hadn't spotted them, or had no interest in this island, since it had moved away from them nearly straight west. Nami frowned, letting Makino take the tiller as Nami began to pour over her map, frowning thoughtfully. "There should be another island a few hours away, one with a massive butte on it. That's where the rumors about the Gold Pirate Woonan says he was from."

"Gimme the spyglass for a minute," Luffy said, landing next to her. Nami obliged, watching as Luffy hopped into the air, rising straight up over the ship until he was at least six or seven stories higher than the Crow's Nest. He hovered there, bouncing off the air for a moment as he put the spyglass to his eye and stared all around them, finally spotting the ship he had noticed before.

Waiting for a few moments, he tried to zero in on the people on the ship. It took him several moments, but he was able to make out enough detail to both shiver and nod.

Falling back down to the ship, Luffy flipped himself off the mizzenmast to land lightly on the gunnel, nodding his head. "That's El Drago over there, and he really does look like some weird human l-lion hybrid from what I can make out anyway."

Nami frowned at him, wondering yet again what was up with Luffy and lions. *Yes, having a healthy respect and fear of lions is normal, but Luffy isn't! A guy who can do what he can put he's still afraid of lions? Strange. Then again, I suppose anything strange would fit right in with this crew.*

Makino pulled out the bounty book, which she kept as part of her job as acting-purser. None of them were willing to let Nami do that job, and Luffy and Zoro didn't care enough. "The 14,000,000 Beli El Drago, hmmm..."

She frowned, looking at a little note at the bottom. Flipped further through the book, she stopped at another bounty picture. "This says that he also has a crewman who also has a bounty, the swordsman Golass, 8,000,000."

"Swordsman?" Zoro said looking up from where he had been sleeping against the mainmast, one hand clenching at the swords at his side. "I remember now, that was why we were in this area in the first place!"

Makino and Nami both sweat-dropped as the thought *talk about a one track mind* went through both their minds at once. Nami however shook it off quickly. "Right, together that's actually a pretty sizable bounty, and maybe they also have some valuables too! Heck, if they are in this area, they might be in search of the Gold Pirate Woonan's treasure, and might even have some clues we can use to find it instead!"

"Then let's head in that direction," Luffy said with a shrug, dumping a small pale of water over her head to once more don his female, bounty hunter form. "Though I wouldn't get your hopes up about Woonan's treasure, that kind of thing never lasts very long you know?"

"But no one knows where he hid it all, and there's only a few rumors that say he came from around here, and there's never been any rumors of anyone finding it,

which considering the treasure was supposed to be enough to fill a dozen ships there would have been! No, it's still out there, but I bet there are a series of clues or something like that, and you have to piece them all together to find the trail!" Nami explained, her eyes gleaming eagerly as they always did when talking about money or valuables.

"We'll see, but I'd think taking the 12,000,000 beli bounty on El Drago would be better than spending time searching for a treasure that may or may not exist." Makino replied, while Luffy shrugged disinterest, turning around to change back to his female form.

Money for money's sake didn't interest Luffy, just as it had never interested Ranma until his father's troubles came home to roost. Luffy was using hunting for bounties as a way to get to know his crew while also taking the time to train them, and it had paid off in that area tremendously already.

The other ship was still a dot on the horizon well out of cannon range when Luffy's hearing saw a blinding flash of blue-ish alight coming from the other ship. Some kind of attack came from it, heading towards the Inglorious Bastard.

Luffy leaped forward over the front of the ship, her leg shooting down. "Rankyaku!" Her attack smashed into the water between the incoming attack and the Inglorious Bastard exploding upwards, creating a makeshift shield. The water took the attack, not allowing the attack through to the Inglorious Bastard. "Makino, Nami, man the cannons! Zoro, be ready to follow me in!"

With that Luffy began to hop through the air towards the other ship, having to stop and cut the water again twice to block further sonic booms. She could hear a shriek at the start of each attack now. Once Luffy also had to dodge an attack coming her way, but the person on the other side of the attack, El Drago, his features and appearance now actually visible, figured out quickly he couldn't tag the girl in the air. Two more times after that he tried to tried to attack the Inglorious Bastard, only for Luffy to block each attack.

By the time Luffy reached the ship, the two ships had been moved within extreme cannon range and begun to exchange fire the normal way as El Drago gasped in air holding his throat, sore from the multiple attacks he had launched. The ships began

to maneuver, though the enemy ship didn't seem to be any more maneuverable than the Bastard with only Zoro, Makino and Nami aboard. That was odd, but not important.

Luffy decided to cut things short, launching an attack of her own at the ship, a sharper "Rankyaku!" than the versions she had been using to make the massive water waves before this. The wind cutter slammed into the mainmast and the two masts on either side of it, cutting them cleanly. The wind immediately pulled the sails over the side where they began to act like so much deadweight, pulling the ship around slightly and causing it to list badly.

Seeing this Nami and Makino ordered Zoro to toss the anchor over the side. The two women and Zoro used the sails to twist the ship around until it's port side faced their opponent's prow, out of its own gun's firing line. The Bastard didn't have as many cannons as it had under Buggy, but it had enough, all of them loaded. As Zoro leaped into the air, Makino and Nami ran from one side of the gun-deck to the other, lighting fuses.

"BABooooom!" The cannons roared, followed by an almost equally loud crunch of shattered timber. That single broadside pounded the other ship into pieces from one end to the others, causing more than a few deaths as the cannons and the splinters of their impact did their horrible work.

Luffy landed on the deck of the ship, looking around for El Drago or the swordsman that was part of their crew, wishful to finish this quickly. At the same time Zoro took to the air bouncing haphazardly towards El Drago's ship, coming close to dropping into the sea several times, and once again smashing his face into the side of the ship before flipping himself up and over the side to land on the deck. "Damn it, I hate Geppo, I swear I will master it eventually!"

Able to keep his feet under the enemy ship's pounding better than his boss, Golass charged Luffy. His massive sword came off his shoulder in a downwards strike towards Luffy with enough power to bisect the little redheaded woman who led this attack on them in two.

Luffy ducked under the attack, grabbing Golass' arm and flipping him over and towards the far end of the ship from where she had landed. Zoro moved toward him quickly, blocking his next attack with his own blades and beginning their duel quickly.

But this moment had allowed El Drago to regain his breath and his feet. He charged forward, slicing and hacking at Luffy with his apparently gold clad nails. "Damn you, you little red-haired bitch! You'll never take my gold!"

Up close Luffy had a single moment of dread at how much like a furry demon the man looked. But then El Drago began to curse the redhead volubly, and that, coupled with the fact he looked more like a lion than a real furry demon let Luffy break out of it quickly. She attacked quickly, smacking El Drago's arm aside and pummeling him with a few punches hurling the far larger man backwards.

Nami watched the goings-on through her spyglass then shook her head at Makino. "That one broadside was enough I think. That ship's already listing badly, and I doubt the boys will have to deal with much of their crew. They seemed undermanned before our attack though nowhere near as much as us. Now..."

Makino nodded understanding, looking queasy. She'd killed a few times before this in self-defense, but she had never really gotten used to doing so. And she knew from talking with Shanks and his crew that dying in a broadside like that was never an easy or painless way to go.

On the other hand Nami was quite a bit more callous toward pirate lives, with reason of course. "We'll wait here until the boys signal they're done, then we'll get Zoro or Luffy back over here to do some paddling. No way are two fragile ladies like us going to be able to row this massive ship over there, and the wind's not coming from the right direction either."

Zoro blocked and battered his opponent sword downward, locking it there, frowning angrily at the taller man, who was trying desperately to free his blade, unable to overcome Zoro's brute strength. "Your sword is weeping!" Zoro growled harshly. "I don't know why you're on this boat, and I couldn't care less, but seeing a swordsman of your caliber treating his skills and his sword so cavalierly pisses me off!"

That seemed to galvanize Golass off and he hurled Zoro away, overcoming the younger man's strength for a moment. When he tried to attack again however, Zoro had already struck, his sword lashing out faster than Golass could track.

The attack cut into the man from shoulder to hip, sending him staggering backwards in a spray of blood. The man stumbled backwards a few more paces still holding his blade and staring at Zoro. He stood there immobile as a statue before falling to his knees as his eyes folded back in his head and he collapsed, overcome by the pain.

"Find a real reason to wield your sword and maybe you'll be worth my time." Zoro said harshly, flicking his blade to one side to get rid of the blood.

He turned just in time to see Luffy finish off El Drago. There was a sound of some kind of thrumming in the air, and Luffy's arm disappeared even to Zoro's sight for a moment. An instant later El Drago's gold armor and the rib cage under it, shattered under the blows hurling the larger man into the air. Before El Drago's howl of agony could finish reverberating over the ocean another blow hammered into his temple, sending him into lala-land.

Sighing as the captain collapsed, and hearing the screams from a few wounded throughout the ship, Luffy turned to Zoro. "Well, that fight was a little better than the last one anyway."

Zoro was about to reply when they both heard what sounded like a young boy screaming, though thankfully not in pain. "Wh, some, somebody help me!" As one the two of them raced over to the entrance to the forecastle, heading down.

later that same day Luffy rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he looked at his navigator. "Why the heck would we bother with that Nami? We just got three bounties of more than 20,000,000 beli combined! No way this treasure of Woonan's worth more than that."

"Come on Luuuuffy," Nami wheedled, leaning against his side and running one finger up his stomach and chest, shuddering a little at how hard his muscles were. *Damn he really is like stone and steel under his skin!*

Once more in his male form Luffy blushed, looking away. "Darn it Nami!" he said plaintively, reiterating his position again. "We've already gotten three bounties to add to our collection. That gives us all enough money for anything I can think of we need in the short term. Besides, if this lot had that map for so long, why haven't they found it yet?"

The would-be pirate crew of four was sitting at an oden stall at present. It was not just any oden stall however it was a stall of the sea. The stall was a small ship around half again the length of the *Bastard's* lifeboat, with an awning over the center which was set up as a long kitchen. On either side of that was a row of benches.

A single old man seemed to run it with the 'help' of the young boy, whose name was Tobio, who the crew had rescued. Tobio was still somewhat shaken and very bruised around the edges but considering he had been aboard a ship under cannon fire he was remarkably hale. Ironically his being in the brig for apparently arguing with the captain had saved Tobio, placing him at the aft of the ship among the bilges, where he was at the far end of the ship from the Bastard's assault.

Both Nami and Makino had been almost beside themselves with shock and horror at the fact a young boy had almost died from their assault. Makino in particular had refused to let Tobio out of her sight until the old man had called him by name. The boy, shaken by his brush with death had actually welcomed the old man's smothering.

Their three prisoners were trussed up all around the *Inglorious Bastard*, scattered so that they couldn't see one another. Their injuries had also been seen to somewhat. Luffy had also taken the time to stuff El Drago's mouth enough so that he couldn't even move his jaws just in case.

"If you're going to look for Woonan's treasure, you won't find anything," the old man said, pushing the young boy who was working the stall with him towards the grill as he served up more food for Luffy and Zoro. The two girls had already finished eating. "You wouldn't be the first pirates to come here to try and find Woonan's treasure, but if there's any kind of treasure here, I would've known about it, and there isn't."

"See, word from a local," Luffy said pointing dramatically at the man.

Nami scowled. "That doesn't mean anything!" she retorted. "It just means that he doesn't know where it is. As for the pirates, I wouldn't trust that group to read a newspaper, let alone a map like this one."

"Nami-chan," Makino said gently. "Luffy's right. We have the three bounties to turn in, we have the gold from that Jango character, and Buggy as well as the valuables from that crab hand person..." She stumbled at the end there, frowning. "What was his name again?"

"I don't think I ever heard it," Luffy said with a shrug. "Wasn't like he was good enough for me to care about anyway."

"Harsh but so very true," Zoro chuckled. "Anyways I agree, we've done enough bounty hunting for a while. Let's take our bounty heads to the nearest Marine base, and then start sailing over to the Grand Line."

"I don't know if we're ready to enter the Grand Line just yet," Luffy cautioned. "I'd like to find a cook at the very least. Even if Makino's able to do the cooking now, we could use the help beyond that to man the Inglorious Bastard."

Luffy smiled over at the old man pointing at Tobio. "I don't suppose he can cook? He could be cook and cabin boy in one."

Zoro chuckled, while Nami giggled and Makino shook her head smiling faintly. "I don't think so," she said before the old man could speak. "A pirate ship is no place for a young boy, or else you would have been taken away with Shanks all those years ago. What nearly happened to Tobio today is proof of that."

"Tobio can't cook anyway." The old man broke in. "Though for getting rid of El Drago and his bunch I'll happily load you up with supplies for free."

"You don't need to do that," Luffy said, shaking his head. "We have more than enough cash to pay for it." Nami made to protest, but he held up a hand quickly. "Yes we do. You're navigator not purser Nami, I won't tell you what to do with your share of the beli, but you can't control all the money we have, sorry."

He looked at the girl silently, one eyebrow raised and she sighed before cocking her head towards the distant mountainous island. "Fine, but can we at least look around here for a bit, I think I've figured out where the treasure could be."

"While we were sitting here?" Luffy asked, smiling but incredulous. He glanced down at the map which was part map and part story, several notes written along the edge of it.

"Yep." Nami said proudly, basking in the looks from her friends. And that was what these three had become over the past week, friends. They had found fun and excitement in equal measure and for the first time in a while Nami had no thought of her village, only the adventure she was currently on.

"Well what are we waiting for then?" Luffy jumped to his feet, pulling Nami up and into his arms cradling her against his chest as easily as if she was a child, before leaping into the air and hopping over the air towards the nearby island. "We'll be back in a bit!"

Tobio and his grandfather stared at the now flying man, shock at what they were seeing stilling Tobio's tongue at how easily these two were talking about finding his dream, the Gold Pirate Woonan's treasure. Before he could get his wits about him, Luffy and Nami were nearly out of sight, and he scowled, turning away. No way would the two of them find the treasure so easily. Not even the way they had dispatched El Drago and his crew with so little effort would make Tobio believe that.

For his part Zoro ignored Luffy's feat with the ease of long practice, not even looking up as the two disappeared. Instead he cocked an eyebrow at the old man. "You got any booze?"

Makino sighed, turning to climb up the rope onto the Bastard, checking on the three prisoners before coming back plopping herself down as the old man began to ply Zoro with sake. She looked at the boy, cocking her head thoughtfully. "So, why were you on that pirate ship anyway?"

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"I don't think I'm ever going to get used to how easily you do this kind of thing," Nami muttered, flushing somewhat. Normally she would have been able to ignore how close Luffy was to her like this. After all, Nami had used her feminine wiles rather often to get men to underestimate her or do what she wanted. But being carried like this through the air like in some fairy tale, in an actual princess carry? That slipped past all her defenses and smashed that tiny, almost hidden button marked 'Teenage girl' in her and just made her want to squeee.

"I suppose it's part of how I was trained, and I've always loved high places." Luffy said with a shrug. "I doubt you'll ever be able to Geppo as easily as I do, your body type just isn't built for strength like that, sorry. But I'm always here, so if ya ever need a pick-me-up, either physical or emotional, the view from up here is hard to beat."

Nami nodded, looking around at the vista laid out before them for a few moments, simply staring in awe. It really was amazing, the sea laid out below her, the mountain in the distance a slowly growing mass of green and brown. After a moment however she began to direct Luffy towards the top of the massive bluff.

"Is that it?" he said looking down at the small light blue painted house sitting on edge of the bluff.

"Looks like it," she said, and Luffy bounced down to the air, setting her down quickly. The two of them entered the very old, obviously abandoned house. Once inside the two of them exchanged a look, then Luffy sighed and moved over to the one piece of furniture still in the room, a giant fireplace made of stone obviously not connected to the wall behind. He pushed on it, and right there was a hidden passage. "Seriously?"

"Pirates aren't normally very smart Luffy," Nami teased. "Something simple like that might well have hidden this from a lot of pirate crews."

As Luffy maturely stuck out his tongue at her Nami turned, taking two pieces of wood from the ground which had obviously been part of some kind of rotted chair, tying them both with some scraps of moldy fabric from the same pile. Lighting them one after another with a flint lighter, she tossed one to Luffy and then led the way down into the tunnel.

They moved down a series of steps in to a basement which was empty except for a slightly raised dais and a chair holding a skeleton next to the far wall. On the wall was a long message of some kind.

As Luffy began to read what was written on the wall, Nami looked around, examining walls, ceiling and floor minutely. But even so, she finished almost as quickly as Luffy finished reading aloud. "Nothing, no further hidden passages, no nothing." She reported, even as she smiled at the idea that the pirate Woonan had realized at the end friendship was more important than gold. She wasn't certain she agreed with that, but it was a nice sentiment anyway. "The old man was right, I guess it really was wishful thinking."

"Do you think Tobio will believe us?"

"Maybe not us, but I bet Makino can get him to," Nami said with a shrug. "And if push comes to shove you can always bring him up here like you did me."

The two of them rejoined Zoro and Makino back at the oden stall, reporting what they found. Like Nami had thought Makino had already softened Tobio down on the idea of leaving home, but the boy still demanded to see Woonan's corpse. Luffy took him up, and brought a far weepier Tobio back to the old man, who turned out to be the Ganzo mentioned in Woonan's final message. With that done, and Ganzo having resupplied their ship while Luffy and Nami were away, the four of them bade Ganzo and Tobio farewell and sailed away in the Bastard.

It took them four days to get back into an area where Nami's maps were more helpful, during which time they had to knock El Drago and the other moron out several times, whenever they tried to escape. Once in a region Nami knew, despite another heavy storm, Nami quickly directed them straight towards a marine base. She was even able to accurately guess when the base's lookouts, having a taller lookout tower than their own crow's nest, would be able to spot them, and sent Luffy below to change into his female form immediately before.

While Luffy was doing that, Makino made certain that they were flying the bounty Hunter flag and the flag of peace from both ends of the ship. While the Inglorious Bastard didn't look much like the Big Top, it was still a large ship, and the marines would be understandably paranoid about it.

A small schooner came out to meet him, it's form swift and quick. It danced around the larger and far more ungainly Bastard, as the commander of the vessel made certain to look at the galleon from every angle with his spyglass.

"Yeah, I want a ship like that," Luffy said, shaking her head. "Big and ponderous was never the way I wanted to go."

"When it comes to ships, big and ponderous will beat small and quick." Nami retorted. "Besides, you think a ship that size would have enough room to let you train with Zoro and the rest of us?"

"Good point," Luffy replied, waving her hand as the marine, a lieutenant third class from the marks on his shoulder, motioned that they should follow his ship in.

This was a slightly larger marine base than the one they had dropped Buggy at, with room for two galleons and three schooners. However it was also noticeably empty, only the one schooner that had escorted them in was here. And even more telling, a single marine second lieutenant came out of the base to meet the bounty hunters at the peer.

He looked askance at the three prisoners, and then gestured to El Drago. "Why is that one's mouth so heavily covered?"

"He has a Devil Fruit of some kind, let's him launch sonic screams, really powerful ones." Luffy replied.

The lieutenant nodded, gesturing a few of his men forward but Luffy held up a hand. "Money first. Come on man, you know the drill!"

"Actually I don't, I've only been a lieutenant second class for a few weeks now, and I've never seen a bounty hunter before this," the man said dryly shaking his head. "But I can guess at least."

Another marine came forward with their own copy of the bounty book, as well as a ledger for the base. After that they got a bit more organized, but unfortunately they weren't able to pay Luffy for all three. Instead, they paid off one the largest alone and wrote out two scrips good at any WG bank for the money, which was fine by Luffy.

"You're a rather small crew," the lieutenant said as the money was being counted under Makino's watchful gaze, the older woman talking to the sergeant standing watch, nearby apparently giving him some tips on how to make their grog last longer. "Especially for a ship that size. I've heard rumors of a 'Red-haired Ranko' but the rumors never mentioned your ship being so large."

"Wait, 'Red-Haired Ranko'? Seriously, is that the best you lot could come up with? Freaking change that right now!" 'Ranko' ordered. "It makes me sound too much like I've got a connection to that Shanks moron."

More than one marine stopped what they were doing to stare at 'Ranko' for that, but then more than one actually nodded, agreeing. Not with the moron part, though there were a lot of rumors about how Shanks sometimes acted which supported that view, but the fact it did make it sound as if Ranko was related to Shanks.

"We'll make sure to change that," the lieutenant replied quickly, shaking his head. "Sorry, sometimes the people making up nicknames for bounty hunters and pirates are... removed from reality to a certain degree."

"It is awfully hard to talk bad about someone who pays your checks isn't it?" Makino quipped, giggling, though she was more giggling at the fact 'Ranko' was still making at the idea of being related to Shanks. Being related to Garp was more than enough for Luffy.

"Still, there's only four of you for a ship that size? I'd recommend getting a smaller one as soon as possible. We're entering the storm season soon, and that ship doesn't look the most seaworthy in any case." The officer went on.

"We're hopefully going to expand the crew going forward. Right now we're looking for a cook who can also look after himself and maybe a doctor as well." Makino was technically their purser, filling in as cook and doctor at the moment out of necessity.

The man smirked suddenly. "Actually, I might be able to point you in the right direction for that. There is a floating restaurant nearby, about three day's sail from here, called the Fighting Baratie towards Logue town." The man rattled off a series of directions which Makino and Luffy both made mental notes for Nami, finishing with: "You'll know it when you see it, it's stylized as a giant fish apparently."

He shook his head irritably, but didn't remark further. First Lieutenant Fullbody had taken one of the schooners and its crew out on an extended 'patrol' which was actually only cover for a date with the daughter of one of the local merchants who supplied the base. But the man refused to say that aloud. However he could admit to the idea that the bounty hunter possibly running into and somehow ruining Fullbody's date did make him smile. Fullbody was an arrogant ass, and this Ranko girl seemed just the type to get under his skin.

His absence was made worse by the fact the commodore in charge of the base was out as well. There had been rumors of a notorious fishman pirate operating in East Blue and he had taken the two galleons, his second-in-command and one of the other schooners out to see if there was any reality to the rumor.

"Cool thanks for the tip," 'Ranko' grinned, clapping the man on the shoulder so hard he nearly stumbled sideways into the water by the quay. "We'll get out your way then, and remember what I said about that name."

The officer nodded shakily, watching as Luffy scaled the latter up to the Inglorious Bastard as easily as someone could walk along the dock. As the Inglorious Bastard moved out of the bay, he turned to his sergeant. "Make a note in the book would you? Ranko is definitely dangerous, three more bounties in that short a time! She's going to put us out of business in East Blue at this rate," he chuckled, before going on more seriously. "The higher-ups will definitely be interested in trying to recruit her in the future."

OOOOOOO

Later that day the Inglorious Bastard began to near the large rocks jutting out of the sea that the marines had told them to look for when sailing to the Baratie. Luffy was up in the crow's nest, the spyglass to one eye as he looked around them, hoping to see the Baratie sometime soon.

While he didn't see the Baratie just yet, Luffy spotted a small boat tied to one of the rocks. There was a man lying in it, as another man stood over him, looking panicky from what Luffy could see from this far away. He sighed faintly then turned to shout down at the others. "Nami, turn the ship slightly to the east, there looks to be two people shipwrecked there."

"Are you sure you want to be a pirate?" Nami shouted back up at him chuckling even as she turned to the tiller.

"Hush you or I'll up your training again!" Luffy yelled back.

Nami quailed. "I'll be good!" She turned, picking up a flagon of ale from beside her set there just for this purpose, hurling it towards where Zoro was asleep leaning against the mainmast.

It smacked into Zoro's forehead and he scowled angrily, shaking himself awake. "What was that for!?"

"Trim the sails slightly, we're apparently going to help some shipwrecked people over there."

A few moments later Zoro's displeasure disappeared as he took in the sight of the two men. "Johnny! Yosaku?"

"You know them Zoro," Luffy said, hopping down from the crow's nest to land lightly on his feet next to his first mate.

"They're bounty hunters. Just not very good ones." Zoro added the second sentence in the undertone, not wanting to hurt his friend's feelings. "I met them a few months back."

With that he turned to shout down at the man in the boat, who brightened up noticeably, his heretofore defensive stance slackening. "Johnny, what're you two doing here, and what's wrong with Yosaku?"

"I don't know aniki!" The man wailed. "He just suddenly collapsed, and I haven't been able to make much headway on my own!"

"Aniki?" Luffy asked, looking at Zoro.

The other man shrugged his shoulders. "I helped them out with a bounty after we met. Anyway, let's get them up here and have Makino take a look at him."

The two men leaped over the side, hauling the two newcomers aboard, during which Johnny somehow nearly capsized their small boat. The resultant splash found

Luffy and Johnny gaped in shock, nearly falling back into the ocean as he saw the tallish black-haired boy turn into a short redhead. "Wh, how..."

"Don't ask, and if you try to touch I break your fingers." Luffy growled.

Nami and Makino took one look at the man lying supine on the deck, of the In-glorious Bastard and shook their heads in unison. "It's scurvy."

"honestly..." Makino sighed, moving to the door leading into the kitchen, mess hall, as Nami took Johnny to task sharply.

"If you don't eat fruits and vegetables, you'll lack many of the essential nutrients found in them, particularly oranges and lemons! How can you two morons have put to sea without even that most basic of basic information! **Everyone** knows what scurvy is, even these two morons!" She shouted pointing at Luffy and Zoro.

"Hey, what's with the name-calling?" Luffy asked, shaking his head.

"I'll stop calling you names when you two stop wrecking the ship whenever you spar!" Nami said sharply. Yesterday's spar between the two men had shattered the back of the shower, which had already been badly weakened by the first spar the two had on the ship.

The two men looked somewhat sheepish, looking away from her.

"Thought not. As for you," Nami said, glaring at Johnny. "I'll ask again, how the hell did you get scurvy in this day and age, heck even lemonade or a single orange a day would have been enough."

"The only drinks we had aboard were was ale, and we thought as men we'd only need meat!" Johnny replied, backing away from the scary orange-haired woman. .

Makino came back at that point, with a pitcher of lemonade mostly made out of lemons. "We'll have to stock up again at the Baratie, we're almost out of the supplies we picked up from Ganzo."

Nami nodded, making a mental note of it while she watched Makino poured the lemonade into just Yosaku's throat. A few moments later some color had returned to the man's face.

After a second Yosaku sprang to his feet. "Wow, I'm cured!"

"YES! Ane-sans, you both are awesome!" Johnny yelled in excitement.

Nami's teeth ground together, unhappy at the idiocy before her while Makino merely shook her head, saying nothing for a moment. Pain was after all a good teacher, and these two definitely needed some information hammered into their heads. Winking at Nami and the two boys she held up a hand, counting down on her fingers.

Johnny and Yosaku however didn't notice this, instead dancing around arm in arm until they stopped, posing. "Sorry for the late introduction, the name's Johnny." The one they had been talking to said, his pose almost reminding Luffy of a statue he had seen in art class back in his former life.

"And I'm Yosaku." The second man said, a lit cigarette in his mouth having pulled it out and lit it while they were dancing around. "If Zoro-aniki vouches for you you're all good with us! Nice to meet you all." He grinned, bowing and trying to look suave as he smiled at Makino. "I have no idea how to thank you ane-san. I thought I was going to die for sure!"

Johnny nodded, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "Seriously I can't..."

At that point Makino's count had reached zero, and Yosaku keeled over, coughing up blood. Johnny turned around with his mouth gaping, "YOSAKU!"

"Sad." Makino sighed, shaking her head. "You can't recover from scurvy that quickly. Your friend will need to rest for a while."

"Morons," Nami said again, before visibly wiping her hands of the two newcomers' idiocy, turning to address Johnny. "So what we're you two doing out here?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. "We were heading to the Baratie. There was talk of a bounty we were after having stopped there a few days ago, and we had hoped to maybe catch them there again or at least figure out where he was going."

"So, do you at least you know the directions to the Baratie from here?"

The man nodded, and actually pulled out a small map, showing the direction from the island they had started at, and also noting the rocky spires had been tied up to. "The Baratie should be sailing around in this area," he said, pointing at a large circled area of the sea to one side of that.

"Good," Nami said after a bare second looking at the extremely limited map. "We'll be there soon then."

"But I have to warn you, there're a lot of dangerous folks around those parts, being so close to Logue Town and the Grand Line. Even the 'Hawk-Eyed' man you've been looking for has been sighted there aniki!" Johnny said.

Luffy's eyes narrowed and he looked at Zoro, who looked caught between trepidation and excitement. "Hawk Eyes, not **the** Hawk Eyes Mihawk? Zoro, you can't believe you're ready to take on the best swordsman in the world can you?"

"I..." Zoro paused, scowling as he looked at Luffy then away. "Maybe not, but I have to at least try. A swordsman must take on any challenge set before him. If I lose, I lose, and that was all my dream was worth."

As Makino and Nami exchanged a glance while Luffy scowled but eventually nodded. He could understand that way of thinking, even if he didn't agree with it in this case. *Can't really say anything though, given how often my own pride got me in trouble in Nerima.* "Alright if Mihawk shows up I won't get in your way. But if he looks to be overwhelming you don't expect me to just sit by and let you throw away your life after I went to the trouble of saving it in the first place."

Zoro scowled as Johnny gaped at the younger looking Luffy. "I told you once Luffy, my dream is more important than my life, don't step in unless I actually fall. A swordsman would rather die than receive help in a one on one match."

Luffy's eyes narrowed. He would only give himself a barely even chance at winning against Mihawk right now, and that was if he used all his tricks, both from this life and as Ranma to outright assassinate Mihawk rather than fight him openly. Zoro was nowhere near close to that level. However, something about Zoro's eyes told Luffy he didn't care about the odds, only the opportunity. "Alright."

"Morons," Nami muttered, as Johnny began to question his aniki about who Luffy was and what Zoro was doing aboard this ship. "Musclebound morons the pair of you."

With Johnny helping Zoro and Luffy with the sails, they were able to get underway again quickly. And true to Nami's prediction within an hour they saw sails over her horizon.

The first set of sails they saw turned out to be out a marine schooner heading in the same direction as they were. But the second belonged to their target. It was a large flat-bottomed vessel, larger in every dimension than the Bastard, with a central built up area about three stories tall, with large sails set front and aft, rearing at least two stories taller. At the back was a large rudder, at the front the fish head they had been told about. The colors looked somewhat jolly, but that was all the detail they could make out from here.

As the Bastard continued on, it slowly caught up with the marine schooner, which wasn't moving anywhere near as fast as it could. The reason for this was not apparent at first, though as they came closer Nami noticed there didn't seem nearly as many marines around on deck as there should have been for a schooner rig, which was the most man-intensive sailing rig she knew of.

A man dressed in a decent looking pinstripe suit with short pink hair moved to the side of the schooner as they came by it. On his hands he wore iron knuckles, which looked as if they had been riveted to his hands. "I don't recognize your ship! Are you bounty hunters?"

"I'm Ranko, and this is my ship." Luffy said, again in his female form, having changed on-the-fly when they noticed the marine schooner.

"I've never heard of you!" Fullbody said disdainfully. "But I recognize two of your crew. So you must be bottom feeders like they are."

"How is it my fault you've not heard of me, moron?" Luffy asked, giving the man the finger. Zoro smirked beside her, holding Yosaku and Johnny back from trying to leap between the ships while Nami and Makino giggled.

Before Fullbody could respond to the redhead's arrogance, a blond haired woman wearing a cocktail dress came out onto the schooner's deck. "Darling, are we there yet? Why are you talking to these little people, I'm getting hungry."

"Oh yuck! That hair with that dress, and this early in the day?" Makino shuddered shaking her head. "Could you look any more desperate?"

"Excuse me!" the blond growled having somehow heard Makino. Turning away from Fullbody she glared across at Makino. "As if you know anything about fashion, standing there in that barmaid attire! What's the matter, your regular dockside whore outfit in the wash?"

"Ohohoh.... What did you just call me?" Makino asked, a veritable storm cloud gathering around her.

"Err she didn't call you anything, she implieeeee...I'm going to shut up now." Nami began before trailing off and moving away from where she had been about to get between the two other women as Makino glared at her as every man there retreated quickly from Makino, the air around her going Kuro and stormy. *Who knew Makino was that fashion conscious. Or did something about the blonde just rub her wrong?*

Fullbody and Luffy exchanged a glance then backed away, quickly trying to draw his date and Makino away respectively. "Come my love, you're right we should hurry on our way or we'll be late for the reservations I made."

"Come on Makino, this is kind of a silly thing to argue about." Luffy began, whispering into the other girl's ear. "I wouldn't mind starting a fight with the marines Makino, but not right now, and not when I'm in this form. If you want we can start something later."

Looking at the younger woman Makino growled, shaking her head from side to side but slowly regaining control from her sudden spurt of anger. One hand rose to touch her cheek, as the green-haired woman shuddered. "I don't know what came over me there Ranko-chan, you're right, it is silly."

Crisis momentarily averted 'Ranko' led Makino away, as Fullbody did the same with his own date. The redhead turned a moment later when there was the sharp report of a cannon behind her. The schooner had opened fire on them from one of its starboard side pintle mounts.

Luffy launched herself forward, her hand flashing out to catch the cannon ball in a show of strength and speed that astonished everyone who saw it save Makino and Zoro. The momentum of the ball twirled Luffy around in midair, but she landed safely, tossing the ball up and down.

"Ya know, trying to shoot someone just cause your date's a fucking slag is really sad asshole!" Luffy shouted angry but unwilling to fire back in this form. *But oh just let me go get changed, and then we'll see!*

The schooner kept moving towards the Baratie, not turning to face the Bastard even though several of the crew were staring in shock at the redhead. Fullbody wasn't among them despite having heard the redhead's shout, unwilling to lose further face with his date and having just realized he **had** heard the name Ranko before.

"Let us at him!" Yosaku shouted, barging to his feet despite still looking a little green around the edges.

"We know that marine, he's always looking down on us bounty hunters, getting in our way!" Johnny said with a nod.

"Stop it," Nami said wearily. "We're here to find a cook, not start our pirate careers by sinking a poor marine schooner." The fact Nami had said 'our pirate careers' there didn't register at the time in anyone save Makino. The older woman didn't say anything, she simply smiled, turning away so no one could spot it.

"Fine, but if I see that asshole again when I'm a guy..." Luffy growled, her fingers twitching around the cannonball. The iron of the ball cratered around her grip and she dropped it gently to the deck before turning to Nami. "Right, let's get this over with."

A few moments later the Bastard docked on the other side of the Baratie from the schooner. "You two watch the ship," Luffy ordered looking at Johnny and Yosaku. "Your friend shouldn't be moving around much anyway Johnny."

As the two bounty hunters nodded asking for the group to bring back some of the restaurant's famed food, the four crewmates hopped from their own ship down to the Baratie. Moving along the walkway set around the actual restaurant they came to the doorway, entering quickly. Inside they were immediately met by a man who Luffy had to stop himself from staring at, the sight being a sort of horrible reflection of one part of his early childhood as Ranma he could still remember fondly. *Oh my god, it's Popeye's evil twin!*

The... odd individual bowed rather daintily towards him. "Hello obnoxious guests, I presume you have cash, yes?"

"Wow you're upfront, aren't ya? Luffy replied in a deadpan tone.

"When people arrive without reservations it pays to be so." The man replied, making a point of looking over the way they were all dressed as well.

"Bud, if your eyes stray below my neckline again or that of my friends I'm gonna remove them, m'kay?" Luffy said pleasantly, but her eyes were deadly. "Yes we've got money and since there are at least five empty tables I can see from here I doubt you're in any position to argue."

"In that case, right this way please." The Bizarro Popeye led them over to a table at the back of the main dining hall set near a spiral staircase leading upwards to the second floor. It was also near the doors to the kitchen, and gave them all a great view of the rest of the dining room.

Because of this they saw they saw Fullbody and his date sitting at a small table by the windows facing the marine schooner. Luffy growled as did Makino, though in her case it was the sneer the blond woman had just sent her way rather than the sight of the marine.

"Calm down you two," Nami said, taking their hands and forcing them to remain in their seats. "Let's find a cook at least before you start a scene."

"Nami's got a point and Luffy, I'm surprised that you are losing it over such a trivial thing. Self-control is the hallmark of any true martial artist." Zoro replied, taking a calm sip from a mug of sake.

"It wasn't trivial the bastard tried to sink us! And seeing as I'm the one who stopped the cannonball I can be pissed." Luffy replied hotly, shoving the swordsman in the shoulder hard so that the sake from his glass splashed in his face.

Before Zoro could retaliate appropriately a blond haired young man came out of the kitchen. He was dressed in a very good black suit, complete with tie and under-shirt, and looked quite spiffy. His hairstyle though nearly made Luffy and Zoro both laugh aloud. It was this mop of blonde hair covering one side of his face and to top it off further...

"Zoro," Luffy murmured, "is it just me, or are his eyebrows really, **really** curly? Like a snail's shell kind of curly?"

"They are indeed," Zoro said with a smirk forgetting his anger at the redhead for now. "Kind of an effeminate looking guy as well."

Just as their table had noticed him, the young man had noticed them. At the sight of the three ladies he suddenly seemed to swoon, holding his chest as hearts appeared his eyes. "Oh my day is blessed, blessed I tell you!" he said, swirling around in a circle as he made his way over towards them before bowing grandly toward the three ladies. "Ladies, your mere presence brightens the room! Pray tell me your names oh beauteous flowers of the sea, and your orders! Name your deepest hungers and I, Sanji, sous chef of this humble restaurant, will see them sated!"

Luffy shivered at the somewhat Kuno-like speech and the ways that last sentence could have been taken before suddenly smirking evilly. "Well," she said, her voice suddenly far daintier and more feminine than normal. "I'm Ranko, this is Nami, and that's Makino. The guy's named Zoro. We, um we, don't actually have that much money..." she said hesitantly.

"Do not worry about money! Your presence pays for your meals, whatever they might be."

"Oh, in that case!" Nami said giggling and getting into the act, leaning over the table to let the blond look down her shirt, while 'Ranko' leaned into her, staring down at the menu in the ginger's hands rather than her own. "We'll have..." the order went on for a few minutes, with even Makino joining in to tease the blonde chef/waiter. Sanji's eyes didn't seem to know where to look, staring at where Ranko's chest was

pressing into Nami's side, down Nami's shirt or at Makino's long legs, which stuck out slightly from below her skirt as she stretched in place.

Despite this, he wrote their orders down accurately and stood up resolutely, posing like a knight on a quest. "Wait for me ladies, and I will return with your food." Sanji then stopped and pointed at Zoro. "You though still need to pay."

"Whatever blondie," Zoro scoffed.

With a finale glare at Zoro (or in the cook's mind 'the lucky asshole sitting with such beautiful ladies') Sanji was off. Once the blonde was gone, Zoro turned to gape at Luffy, who was laughing with Nami now as Makino giggled beside them.

"That was great!" Nami said high-fiving the redhead who grinned at her as she spoke. Her voice was low so as to not be overheard as she went on. "Where the heck did you learn to play men like that, I thought you hated it when men looked at you in that form."

"I told you about that scam my brothers and I ran when I was younger right?" Luffy said smiling gently at the memory, looking over at Makino who smiled too, though that particular scam had led the trio of boys into the worst adventure of their young lives. "Makino here helped train me, not only as a high class lady but as a flirt too. I only use it when there's food involved though." This was also a holdover from his previous life Luffy wasn't proud of, but he was unwilling to change it.

Zoro was shaking his head. "You have just lost so many man points it's not even funny."

"It's not like he's going to try anything, and free food is free food," Luffy said with a grin, smacking the green-haired man on the shoulder. "Tell me you wouldn't do the same thing for booze if you could."

At that Zoro paused, then looked away. This was answer enough for the three girls who all laughed.

A few moments later the man come out, serving them a few appetizers completely, naming the dishes as he put them down. It all looked tremendous, and Makino was the first say so. Nami flirted with the man some more for a few moments, but

Luffy cut to the chase. "Tell me Sanji, can you tell us who here among your fellows would be interested in signing up with a ship's crew?"

"Pirate, marine, or merchant?" Sanji asked, becoming somewhat more serious as he stood up, reaching into a pocket to pull out a cigarette, lighting it before bringing it to his lips.

"Bounty Hunter at the moment," Luffy said looking towards the marine and his date, who had just made another sneer towards Makino. What was going on between the two women Luffy didn't know, and wasn't about to get involved in. "Pirate eventually." She added in a low voice.

Beside Luffy Nami stiffened at that reminder. That was the first time that Luffy had brought that up for a while, being too busy taking bounties and training the crew. But despite that and her own misgivings about pirates, after seeing Luffy in action several times now she moved past it with remarkable speed.

Luffy was simply something else when it came to pirates, not like the scum of the sea she was used to or that their crew preyed upon. *There needs to be a new word for pirates like him. Corsair maybe? Freebooter? Freebooter sounds better. It's going to be really hard to leave them, but, but I have to, and soon...*

Nami came back to the here and now when Sanji shook his head. "You can ask any of the cooks here to join your crew. Their skills will certainly be good enough for any pirate crew. But I doubt you'll get many takers."

"Not even you, Sanji-kun?" Nami said, reaching out to rub one finger down his jaw, flirting coming as second nature to her both to get her own way and to take her thoughts off her own problems. "Not even if it the crew has us three on it?"

That almost seemed to cause the man to melt into a puddle but a shout from the open door to the kitchen brought him back to reality, aided by the apple core smacking into the side of his head. "Get back to work you little eggplant"

"Shitty geezer," Sanji muttered before making his apologies and moving through the dining room, taking orders from all the tables, including that of Fullbody.

Left alone for now the four turned to their own discussion, though it was centered around Sanji. "What kind of fighter is he?" Zoro asked, frowning thoughtfully. "The way he moves he's obviously had some training, but he's no swordsman, I don't think he's a hand-to-hand fighter either."

"A kickboxer of some kind," Luffy said definitively. "You can tell he's got a lot of strength in those legs of his, heh, I bet he could learn Geppo in a week or less. He also might have some strength in his arms, but I doubt he actually uses any punches in his style. His palm is slightly calloused, but not his knuckles."

"How can you tell?" Nami asked, shaking her head.

"You know navigation and maps, I know fighting. It's a study of a lifetime," Luffy said with a shrug. *Or rather two lifetimes in my case* Luffy thought sardonically. "And you can never truly reach the end of it."

Zoro nodded at that, and he and Luffy clinked glasses. Zoro had been able to create his first long-range attack yesterday, a wind strike much like his onigiri or Takanami attacks, only with more range. It wasn't a finished product by any means, he didn't even have a name for it, but it was definitely a step in the right direction.

They watched as Sanji served the various tables, then as Fullbody began to get in his face about something in the soup Luffy smirked suddenly. Leaning back and propping her feet up on the table she turned to the others. "I'll bet 50 beli on Sanji kicking him through the wall and clearing the outer deck into the sea."

"I'll take that action," Zoro replied promptly. "I'll put fifty on him just roughing the pink-haired fool up."

"Barbarians," Nami said shaking her head before eagerly slapping her own 50 beli note down on the table. "50 on him roughing Fullbody up, but someone else coming in before Sanji can take it too far."

"I think that's a copout, you have to name whoever is going to interfere at least." Luffy said pouting at Nami shoving her shoulder against the other girl's, who grinned at her and did the same back.

Luffy's curse might be weird as hell at times, but for some reason it actually helped Nami get closer to him/her. In fact Luffy and Makino, and even Zoro to a lesser degree, had wormed their way under Nami's armor, becoming the best friends she had ever had barring her older sister Nojiko. Though Nami had yet to consciously realize this.

"No," Makino said shaking her head and gathering the cash towards her. "As I'm not putting any money down, I rule that she doesn't have to name the individual, though she does have to say **how** they will interfere. Nami-chan?"

Nami thought for a moment then shrugged. "Combat, someone stopping him forcefully. Judging by the apple that nearly brained Sanji earlier it seems violence is common here."

A few moments later she was scowling at the old man with the magnificent handlebar mustaches and a monstrously tall hat. He had come out and interrupted the action before someone else could by shouting at Sanji along with the man who had met them at the door, whose name was Patty apparently.

"A pleasure taking your money," Zoro said, smirking at the two other gamblers.

"Hmm... Sanji's really got a thing about wasting food huh." Luffy mused, shaking her head. "There's got to be some kind of history there I think."

"I would say so," Makino said, nodding.

"More importantly, I think he should be the one to join our crew just for his fighting abilities. I doubt any of the others are that good." Nami said, eager to forget the money she'd just lost to Zoro while also making plans to get him back for this.

The old man was near enough to have heard her, and he cocked his head at the three girls and the man sitting there. He knew the man was dangerous, but it was the redhead with the carefully hidden but very dangerous aura which made him stop. There was something there, more than the look in her eyes... After a second however he shook his head. "If you want to take the little eggplant, go right ahead, he's just a burden here."

"Is that so?" Luffy said, easily seeing the man didn't really mean that. He was just acting sort of like a father trying to smack his son out of the nest. "Then you wouldn't mind me asking him later?"

Just then the second half of the day's floor show arrived. A panicking marine raced in, smacking the door open quickly and going to his knees in front of his lieutenant. "Lieutenant Fullbody! That pirate we caught, the one from Krieg's crew, he escaped!"

"Sh, shat's impossible!" Fullbody lisped, staggering to his feet, his face still bloody from the seventeen kicks Sanji had delivered within a few milliseconds of one another. "'E's not eat'n fer weeksh, howsh 'e got shtrenghta move?"

Around them all people began to mutter and start to act frightened at the name of Krieg while Luffy's eyebrows rose and she smiled in delight. "Hey Nami, how much is Krieg worth again, I can't remember."

Despite her sudden worry and her irritation at having lost the bet Nami nodded and reached for her bag where she kept the bounty book. As she flipped it open however she paused, staring at a specific page within, her face hardening.

Makino was the only one who noticed this however. Zoro had continued to watch the action going on, but Luffy had grabbed up a small single penny piece, his eyes narrowing as he looked past the marines to the doorway still swinging behind them. Between one second and the next he hurled it, the penny zooming so fast through the air only Zeff could follow it. He turned so as to look at the redhead thoughtfully out of the corner of his eye, while he also kept an eye on the doorway.

The frightened marine private shook his head, but just as he spoke there was a sharp retort of a pistol and his shoulder suddenly exploded in blood and bone. "Gah!?"

The man on the other side of the door walked forward, his body slumping, his feet dragging. He had grey skin, a scruffy beard, and a green shirt with gray pants and a striped headband, though it was the bags under his eye that most grabbed attention. Despite his obvious exhaustion however he kept hold of the pistol in his hand, having dropped another by the door.

The apparent pirate staggered over to the nearest table, which emptied quickly and he sat down, ignoring the man he had just shot or the fact something had hit his pistol, causing the bullet to go wild. Leaning back in the chair he looked around, his eyes shadowed by his headband. "This place is a restaurant, right? Get me some food!"

The evil Popeye, Patty, walked forward, a rather disturbing smile on his face. "Welcome, shit-stain pirate!"

The pirate scowled angrily. "Do your ears work? I'm a customer, and I just demanded some fucking food! Get it for me, now!"

Leaning down to help his wounded marine to his feet Fullbody mumbled something, retreating quickly, moving towards the doorway now that it was clear.

"Pardon me dumbass, but can you actually pay for your meal?" Patty asked, still smiling that disturbing smile.

Luffy and Zoro burst out laughing and even Makino laughed, shaking her head. Nami, who had been brought out of her fugue by the retort of the pistol, shook her head.

The Krieg Pirate raised his remaining pistol to point at Patty's forehead. "Do ya take lead, ya dumbass cook?"

"So that's a no then?" Patty said. Before the pirate could make another move, Patty's huge Popeye arms smashed him through the table with an overhand blow.

"Damn it Patty. Don't break the damn furniture! You're as bad as the baby eggplant!" Zeff grouched.

"If you can't pay the bill, you don't get fed, simple, ya stupid shit-stain." Patty growled, crossing his powerful and heavily tattooed forearms.

All the cooks in the dining hall cheered. "Nice going Patty! Show that idiot pirate who's boss!"

Luffy's eyes narrowed, noticing that both Zeff and Sanji weren't joining in the cheering. Zoro was watching with a scowl on his face and both Makino and Nami were looking on now as the roar of the pirate's stomach suddenly filled the room.

A sneer on his face Patty leaned down. "Is that your stomach growling?"

"It's, hack!" the pirate coughed, grunting in agony but forcing himself to his knees. "I, it's just gas jackass. Now go get me some food, or, or I'll."

"If you don't have money get the hell out of the restaurant you moocher!" Patty growled, kicking the pirate sending him onto his back. "This isn't a place for broke ass pirates like you! I'm not going to give you even a single bread crumb!" The man coughed up some blood.

Grabbing his man, Fullbody decided to get while the getting was good, followed quickly by his date and a few other restaurant goers. Some of the other diners though joined the cooks in cheering Patty on.

But Luffy noticed that Sanji and Zeff were again not joining in the cheering, and that Sanji had turned, walking back into the kitchen. The redhead exchanged a glance with Makino, who had also noticed and she nodded. Zoro, who had some understanding of what starvation was like, shook his head, looking away as the pirate crawled out of the restaurant.

Shuddering slightly Nami turned away from the sight of Patty curtseying. She was about to say something to Luffy about making certain that wasn't the kind of cook he/she was looking for but Luffy stood up, looking out the window. "Oh thank god! The marines are leaving. I'll be right back, I want to change back to my real body."

Nami smirked, shaking her head at the redhead. "Not as comfortable with Sanji's flirting as you wanted us to think?"

"Not even by half. I can take his over the top words and even his whole swirly eye, but the moment he tried to kiss my hand is when he crossed the line." Luffy replied. Shuddering she walked off while behind her Nami laughed, her good mood restored for the moment.

After changing, both his body and into his normal clothing and grabbing his straw hat, Luffy hopped back onto the Baratie, walking around the walk path at the back for a moment. there he found Sanji talking to the pirate from earlier, having just placed a large plate of fried rice in front of him.

"...Any hungry person is a customer." Sanji was saying as Luffy arrived, blowing smoke from his cigarette. "Being on the open sea without food, it's the worst. The sea can be a cruel, cruel place under such circumstances." He bowed his head and sighed, "I understand it more than most...how bad starving can be on the ocean..."

The pirate with the grey skin gulped once, eyeing Sanji then grabbed the plate like the starving man he was, his earlier hesitance utterly forgotten. "Delicious...this is the most delicious food I've ever had! Thank you so much chef!"

"Heh, it's damn good huh?" Sanji had a happy grin of his own.

Luffy called out below, "Well, looks like you got some food after all, despite your earlier poor manners." He chuckled as both the men started, looking over to where Luffy was now leaning against the wall of the restaurant. "Hey Sanji! You ever wonder what it'd be like to become a pirate?"

"...Eh?" Have we met before?" Sanji asked, bemused the Kuro-haired teen knew his name.

"Ya met my... sister and the rest of my crew inside. She was the redhead, she told ya we were acting as bounty hunters for now, but we're going to turn pirate soon right?" Luffy replied, not wanting to explain his curse again, and thinking it would be hilarious later on to spring it on the flirtatious chef at some point.

"Oh, the redhead huh...I suppose you do look like her, somewhat anyway." Sanji nodded, looking a little leery. He had after all had several run-ins with spouses, boyfriends, and protective father/brothers over the years, and was in no mood to deal with that.

"As to your question, a bit I suppose. All the chefs here are rather hot-blooded, and old man Zeff was a pirate too. But if you're asking if I'm interested in joining your crew like your sister was saying, I'll have to refuse." Sanji looked up at the sky, "I have reasons for wanting to work here."

"Oh, and are those reasons, or dreams?" Luffy asked shrewdly, causing Sanji to twitch visibly.

"I've no reason to tell you that." He replied, turning away to stare out over the sea, blowing out a smoke ring as he flicked his cigarette out into the ocean before taking out a new one. "Ask one of the others, you might find someone to take up your offer."

"What kind of answer is that man? Seriously, you've got the right attitude, and I can tell you're strong. Unless you are saying all the other chefs can both cook as well as you and fight as well as you, you're the only chef here I want on my crew. Hell even if that was the case I'd still want you on my crew because of the way you handled grey-skin here."

"Heh, the other chefs wish they could fight or cook as well as I can!" Sanji said proudly, his new cigarette between his lips as he smiled at Luffy words. "But my answer is still no."

"Sorry to cut in..." The Krieg pirate butted his head into the conversation. "Ano, I haven't introduced myself, I'm Gin, a member of the Krieg Pirates. You say you're a pirate kid? What's your goal?"

"Pirate King." Luffy said, a challenging smirk on his lips as his eyes lit up. "I'm going to go to the Grand Line, find Raftel and One Piece!"

Sanji's eyes widened, but Gin just looked at him uncaring. "If you're still looking for a cook and you said you're acting like bounty hunters for now, that means you're just starting out I suppose?"

"Sanji here'll be the fourth to join my sister and me." Luffy lied glibly, pointing his thumb at Sanji.

"Hey shitty Strawhat! I already said I wouldn't be joining!" Sanji shouted.

Luffy's previously friendly face shut down and he turned to stare at Sanji. "I'm sorry, did you just call my straw hat shit?" While not as dear to Ranma/Luffy as the hat had become to original Luffy, it was still precious to him, a symbol of his promise to become the strongest and the freest man in the world.

Before Sanji could respond Gin spoke up. "You don't seem like a bad guy so let me give you some free advice just give up on going to the Grand Line. It's just one ocean amongst the five. If you want to be a pirate there are plenty of other places for you to explore."

"Heh, the Blues are ponds in comparison to the Grand Line, man." Luffy replied, laughing. "Besides, my dream is to be Pirate King! How can I become the Pirate King if I'm scared of the ocean Gold Roger made his name on?"

Gin's eyes widened, "Don't you get it kid! There's no way your crew will survive on the Grand Line! It's a madhouse, the seas don't act anything like they should, your compass can't help you, and the people there!" He yelled, then paled even further as if struck by some horrible memory.

For a moment Luffy just looked at Gin, then his smile widened. "Sounds like my kind of fun. Besides, how are you supposed to chase your dream if you don't want to put your life on the line?" At those words, Gin's eyes widened as did Sanji's.

"Kid..." Gin said, before shaking himself. "At least I tried, if you get yourself killed trying to grab the impossible, that's no skin off my nose." With Sanji's help, he moved over to a nearby rowboat, left there by either a customer or possibly the marine schooner.

"Thank you so much for the food, Sanji!" Gin said, smiling wanly up at them from the rowboat. "You're my savior! Would it be alright if I came back here to eat again?"

"Sure." Sanji grinned, "Any time, just next time either come to the back of the restaurant, or bring some money along."

"SANJI!" A voice roared from above them.

"Sounds like Zeff's looking for ya. Are you gonna be scolded for giving Gin here food?" Luffy asked. he doubted it, given the look he'd seen on the old mans' face, but best to make sure.

As Gin began to stutter apologies, Sanji shook his head, kicking the plate off the side of the ship. "What are you talking about? How can he yell at me for giving out food for free if there's no proof?"

As the rowboat Gin got on his knees as the boat started sailing away and bowed down, "Thank you Sanji! I'll never forget this!"

"Yeah whatever, just get outta here, Gin!" Sanji waved him away.

"Get back to work shitty eggplant!" Zeff yelled from the doorway where he had been watching everything for a few minutes, unseen by even Luffy.

As Luffy turned to look at the man, he caught Zeff eyeing him up and down, before a smirk appeared under his massive mustaches. "So you want to take the shitty eggplant huh, you must not have high standards then. Why don't you take him, it's not like we need him here anyway."

As Luffy grinned Sanji scowled, striding forward to go nose to nose with Zeff. "You shitty geezer, I've been Sous Chef here for near a decade, served here longer than any of the others, way back when this place was nothing more than a gleam in your inebriated eye! So where exactly do you get off saying I'm not needed?"

Zeff scoffed. "Don't talk so high and mighty you shitty brat! All you ever do these days is pick fights with the guests and sniff around the ladies like some bitch in heat. And you can't cook a decent meal to save your life! So go be a pirate you shitty brat. It's better if you just get the hell off my ship."

Sanji reached forward and snatched Zeff's collar in a tight fist, almost biting through his cigarette as he roared at the older man. "You shitty mustached bastard! Have you been wanting to say that garbage for long? Say anything you want about how I act but don't you dare insult my cooking! I'm staying here no matter what you say! I'll stay here until the day you die! No matter how you try to chase me out, I'll be here to take over!"

"I ain't dying for at least another hundred years, you shitty brat." Zeff scoffed, easily breaking Sanji's grip and turning away.

"Mouthy shit-eating geezer." Sanji muttered as he got to his feet.

"That was fun to watch," Luffy laughed, clapping him on the back. He easily understood what Zeff was trying to do, though looking at these two almost made the Luffy part of him think Genma and he had been well-adjusted when it came to being able to communicate with one another. "Well, since you just got fired, that mean you're free to join my crew."

He dodged sideways as Sanji suddenly flipped onto his hands and kicked backwards with both feet faster than most would have been able to track. "As if you shitty strawhat!?"

"Hey! What did I say about dissing the hat!?" Luffy growled, lashing out with a kick of his own that caught Sanji in the chest before he could dodge it. Sanji grunted finding himself airborne and hurled backwards into the restaurant as Luffy scowled after him before shaking his head. "Meh, better let him cool down a bit."

"So does anyone have any objections to a stay here a few days while I try to convince Sanji to come with us?" Luffy asked that evening, looking around at his crew. Johnny and Yosaku of course didn't really count, but he wanted to make sure that the others were all right with this. "If Krieg shows up that is a large bounty we can add to our war chest, and I think we won't find a better fighting chef than Sanji in East Blue."

Makino shrugged. "I'm all right with it. It gives me time to talk to the chefs and guests about some rumors concerning the Marines in Logue Town. Apparently there is a very strong Marine stationed there, and I'd like to know what we're getting into before we actually arrive there. We certainly have enough money to stay."

"I am all right with it I suppose," Nami said, her voice uncaring, her eyes hooded.

Luffy looked at her from the corner of his eyes, frowning internally. Her attitude had been going up and down all day.

He wasn't the only one who had noticed. Makino caught his eye, and shook her head lightly, indicating that she would speak to Nami about it later with a fingertip pointed to her own face.

"I'd object if we left," Zoro said bluntly, not noticing any of this byplay. "If Johnny was right, Hawk Eyes might be in the area, and I can't pass up that opportunity."

"No, I don't suppose you can," Luffy said with a shrug and a sigh. He knew Zoro was going to lose that fight, and he thought that deep down Zoro did too. But Zoro was a martial artist, or in his parlance a swordsman. The need to challenge the best out there was ingrained into their psyches.

"More importantly," Zoro said, smirking suddenly and leaning forward. "When are you going to tell the Love-sick Cook about your curse?"

"Not until after he agrees to join our crew, until then it's a positive. Although if he tries to kiss my hand or anything else..." Luffy shuddered. "We'll probably have to spend some of that money on repairs to the Baratie after I get through with him."

The others laughed, even Nami coming out of her funk for a moment. "So we're all agreed? Good," Luffy said after the laughter died down. "In that case Zoro, we'll start training in the morning, until right before lunch. After that Nami your training will begin, with Zoro and Makino helping you out as I try to convince Sanji during lunch."

Nami winced but nodded. Her ability to dodge had gone up dramatically because of the training, even if her ability to hit hadn't. Luffy judged she was right on the cusp of really using Kami-E. She had even, to Luffy's astonishment, also shown signs of Observation, not a lot of course, but a little, far more than Luffy had in the first few years of his training in Haki.

Zoro nodded too, eager to get back to it. "Start training me in Tekkai," he said looking at Luffy seriously. "I think I've got a good enough handle on Geppo."

"No you don't you just want a break from falling into the sea every other day," Luffy said with a grin.

The swordsman scoffed but he didn't argue with the statement, looking away slightly. Makino and Nami both giggled: the sight of Zoro continually falling into the ocean while he tried to spar with Luffy was the highlight of their days at sea.

"I think Johnny and Yosaku should be put to work if they're going to stay with us," Makino interjected. "Yosaku should be all right to move around more by the end of tomorrow, and the two of them can start work on some of the repairs to the ship since I bought supplies at that island with the crab pirate. Johnny mentioned that he had had some carpentry background. I know you can do them Luffy, but this way those two will pay for their passage."

"That's an excellent idea. I want that shower wall repaired!" Nami said quickly, glaring at Luffy and Zoro. The two men sheepishly scratched their heads in unison, looking away.

Later that evening however, Nami's attitude took a dip for the worst and she sat in the captain's quarters she had taken over, staring at the bounty book on the captain's desk. It wasn't open. It was simply sitting there looking almost innocent but commanding her attention all the same.

"You want to talk about it Nami-chan?" Makino asked softly from the doorway.

Nami looked up quickly, as if she had been caught doing something she shouldn't, but she subsided at the look of understanding and concern in the woman's eyes. She knew Makino didn't have any idea what she was thinking about, but the other woman had obviously picked up on something. "I-it's nothing. Nothing that you or the others can help me with anyway," Nami said lamely looking away.

I don't want to get you all killed. Even as strong as he is, there's no way Luffy is strong enough to take on Arlong... is there? The fact that Nami could even think about that was a sign of how far she'd come. But she still couldn't bring herself to believe that Luffy was stronger than Arlong despite all the times he'd proved his strength since they met.

"Nami, remember we're here for you whatever happens," Makino said. "I know you still object to really being part of this crew sometimes, but you are, and even if you weren't or even if you had a legitimate reason not to be, Luffy would still count you among his friends. He, Zoro and I would help you regardless."

Nami didn't say anything to that and Makino sighed, reaching over to ruffle the girl's hair in a way that reminded Nami painfully of Bellemere before turning and

leaving. As soon as the girl was gone Nami leaned over, thumping her head onto the desk as she fought back tears. "Bellemere, what should I do?"

Outside Luffy sat on the ship's prow above the small forward facing cannons in a meditation pose. Makino approached him, and he looked up hopefully but Makino shook her head. "She didn't say anything to me. You know you should be the one to ask Luffy-kun."

"No," Luffy said with a shake of his head. "I've already done all I can to get her to trust me, at least I think I have. It's not a matter of trust, it's something else. Some kind of fear is riding Nami, keeping her from really asking for our help and I don't know, but it might not be a fear for herself either. I'd hoped Nami would open up to you being another 'actual' woman, but I guess not. We'll have to wait and see, I suppose. Keep an eye on her okay? Don't be obvious about it, but I want Nami to know that we're here for her."

"Of course," Makino said, smiling down at the young boy she had helped raise into this fine young man, leaning down to gently kiss his forehead before turning to go back inside.

OOOOOOO

Nodding his head politely to the marine ensign who was waiting on the wharf with a clipboard, Kuro held out his hand. "Good afternoon Ensign, I would like to speak to Sergeant Dearborn please and your commanding officer if at all possible."

The name of the marine was one of several dozen Kuro had 'befriended' while under his persona as a butler when they stopped in at the island for supplies. Just in case he ever wanted to invade this base for any reason. This need was greater than he had ever hoped to see, but his planning ahead severed him well here.

The marine looked blank for a moment then nodded. "I believe the sergeant is due back this evening sir, are you here to visit him? And might I have your name and island of origin." The young marine asked, pulling out a pen. The marines of course would have to keep a record of whoever was on the base at any given time.

"I am Kalhadore of Fuchsia, and yes, I'm here to see the sergeant, and to check on the accuracy of some rumors which spoke of a pirate ship seen near Fuchsia. I am

afraid that there is only one target for up Pirates in the area, and I wanted to see if I could ask questions."

This was a leading comment. Kuro gave out some information, both false and true, in order to get some in return. It was an old tactic used by spies and infiltrators the world over but it was an old tactic because it worked, and the marine nodded. "I understand your concerns sir, and we have a group of pirates in jail here that were indeed found near that island I think. We would have sent them on to Logue Town for execution, but there's no galleon nearby to take them. If you wish to question the captain about them, we can talk to him first before the Sergeant's ship is due back late this evening."

"Very good ensign, let's get the serious portion of my visit over with first then," Kuro replied.

Usopp frowned, looking at Kalhadore. He was a little out of sorts being surrounded by so many Marines, the quay being a bustling place at the moment as a supply ship was being unloaded on one side, and on the other marines were looking over a large, heavily damaged pirate galley. "What's this about pirates being near Fuchsia?"

"A moment please, ensign," Kuro said, nodding his head politely to the young ensign while pulling up a bag. The marine looked at it curiously, but the fact that this civilian had gotten his rank right completely disarmed him for the moment.

"I told Ojou-sama that I was here to check up on a friend, and I am. But there were also rumors I overheard from some of the fisher-folk that they had spotted a pirate ship in our waters."

"I never heard about that!" said Usopp excitedly. Why didn't anyone mention there were pirates around to the great captain Usopp?! I would have prepared defenses just in case, maybe even gone out to meet them and converted them to my crew!"

"Why do you think they would tell you?" Kuro asked coolly. "The townsfolk know your obsession with pirates. While they are not going to argue with your reasons, they're certainly not going to feed that obsession either, certainly not given your boy-who cried wolf activities."

Usopp pouted, but understood. "And the only real target in the area would be Ojou-sama and her fortune. That's an ugly thought."

"Hence why I'm interested in making certain it was just a rumor," Kuro said, his voice still cooler than even his normal ultra-formal tones.

"Although it appears as if it was not and that the Marines with their typical efficiency have already taken care of the threat," he said in a louder tone, nodding at the Ensign, who puffed himself up a little, though not so much. He knew after all that a group of bounty hunters had captured that group of pirates rather than the marines.

Usopp nodded, though he was still frowning as he looked around, rather nervous. This was after all the first time he had been away from his home island, and the marines were making him even more nervous with their uniforms and their cleanliness and their anti-pirate ways.

Over the four days the two of them had been at sea they had not gotten any closer but his respect for Kuro had grown somewhat. Despite being prissy and officious, the older man was pretty good around the ship. He also had his reasons for disliking Pirates, which made Usopp somewhat more respectful of his opinions. "What am I supposed to be doing while you're hunting down that rumor and talking to your friend?" He asked.

"Talk to the Marines, explore? You want to go out to sea don't you? Ask some questions from people who have. You've certainly plied me with enough of them, and I'm no real sailor." Kuro said dryly pushing up the glasses once more with his palm.

He had been so, **so** tempted to kill the boy several times during the trip. But Kaya had been right, you really needed at least two people to man the Going Merry. *And besides, now that I have him here, he can fulfill his role as scapegoat anyway if all goes according to plan.*

"Would that be all right Ensign?" 'Kalhadore asked, turning back to the young officer.

"So long as he stays on the wharf, that will be fine sir," The younger man nodded, looking at the even younger long nosed youth with interest for a moment before

turning away. "If you'll follow me? I can't let you go alone, all civilians have to be escorted."

"Of course, it is a military facility after all," Kuro said, making a point to let the Ensign see his warning glance at Usopp, further putting the youthful officer at his ease. With that he walked off, the ensign now not even noticing that Kuro had taken his bag along. Just in case.

As the two walked off, Usopp scoffed irritably. *I'm not a kid who needs to be watched all the time, I can handle myself!*

With that he walked off toward the other side of the port, before disappearing under some over hung gantries and pulley systems. From there he made his way to another entrance into the facility, a smaller supply entrance rather than the main one used by civilians and important visitors. Moments later, he was in the base exploring. Sneaking around like this was fun, and great practice too for when he was a pirate.

He paused thoughtfully at a staircase, wondering if he should go up or down, and decided to go down figuring there would be less people in the basement. He was right, there weren't many Marines here, though the few scattered around were in guard positions set up at intersections of the somewhat large jail area.

Past a large group of them at the bottom of the stairwell he saw several Pirates stuck in jail cells. But the oddest was a single jail cell holding a barrel for some reason, on top of which was stuck a severed head in a goldfish bowl. It had longish blue hair, a vaguely scruffy appearance, and the one eye he could see from here was rolled up in the back of its head, and its nostrils were sticking out of the water at the top of the bowl for some reason. *What the heck is that about! I didn't think Marines were sick enough to take trophies!*

OOOOOOO

Kuro followed the Ensign through the corridors, stopping and nodding politely twice when the Ensign stopped to salute a superior officer. There were two lieutenants apparently on the base, along with a base commander whose rank was commodore despite the fact that there was no galleon stationed here at the moment. This was because this base was an important supply base, and galleys periodically came and went

from the larger more frequently used outposts elsewhere in East Blue, stopping here to take on supplies before moving on.

"Can I ask what are you going to do with that pirate ship? Take it apart, sink it? I'm afraid I don't know what Marines do with captured pirate ships." Kalhadore asked.

The ensign looked over his shoulder, shrugging his shoulders. "At the moment there we're repairing and renovating it into a prison galley. The pirate crew from that ship isn't the only one we have here currently, though thankfully we sent off a lot of the last group already."

"I see," Kuro said nodding thoughtfully and filing that information away.

Someone had evidently been very busy, though he hadn't heard any rumors of any big-name Marine being seen in East Blue in the last few years. There'd been a strange rumor a few weeks ago about the Iron Fist Garp being seen, but that was obviously a rumor and nothing more. Still, it didn't matter. As long as the White Hunter didn't come out from Logue Town, there was no marine in this ocean that Kuro feared.

A few minutes later the ensign knocked on a doorway in front of them, and after a sharp brusque 'enter' opened the door saluting quickly. "Sir, the civilian who showed up with the Going Merry from Fuchsia Village, he wants to ask a few questions about the pirates we captured recently.

The commodore, the one eyed older man Luffy and Nami had met, nodding his head politely at the butler. "I recognize you. My men have said you are the butler to Kaya-san, correct?"

"That is correct Sir," Kuro said, performing a somewhat sloppy salute followed by a far more proper bow, not removing his bag from his shoulder. "I am here to look into rumors that there were pirates near Fuchsia. If there were, there was only one real goal for such a group on our island, and I wanted to make certain that they were taken care of, and that there was nothing behind it other than normal pirate greed."

The captain nodded seriously. "A justifiable concern I suppose. We haven't questioned them about their goals in the area yet. It could've just been luck of course, this group lost their original captain years ago, and they haven't been seen often since,

and certainly haven't been much of a danger to anyone. But if you want we can question the new captain of the group."

"Would you mind if I sat in on such an interrogation?" 'Kalhadore' asked politely, smiling inwardly, pushing up his glasses once more with the palm of his hand. "If there was anybody behind the pirates being in the area, I might be able to drop a few names which could elicit a response."

"If you have evidence of that..." the captain began.

But Kuro shook his head. "Nothing actionable, just a feeling as it were in many cases. And the fact that a few individuals did not want Ojou-sama to take control of her family's fortune after her parent's passed away."

"Regular rich people politics then," the captain said with a shrug. "You're right, that's nothing we can act upon. But I suppose you can sit in if you think you can say anything to get a response. Ensign, if you would?"

The three men stayed silent as the ensign led the way down to the interrogation room, where they waited silently again for Jango to be brought to them. The hypnotist's clothing had been exchanged for the white and black stripes of a prisoners garb the world over, his beard was somewhat unkempt, and his glasses were missing letting a truly magnificent shiner be seen in all its glory. He was also limping somewhat.

All in all Jango looked as if he had been put through the ringer. But his one open eye lit up when he saw his captain, and he was about to speak but a sharp glare from Kuro silenced him quickly.

The prisoner shuffled into his seat, and the Marines who had escorted him saluting their captain before moving back to stand either side of the doorway they had escorted the prisoner through. "Thank you Ensign," the captain said as an aside, sitting down quickly across from Jango. "You can return to your normal duties now."

"Sir!" the Ensign said sharply, then did an about-face equally sharply.

This however caused the youth to smack right into Kuro's shoulder, the shoulder from which his bag was currently hanging. To Kuro's horror his bag clinked audibly

with the sound of metal on metal and the man stopped, staring at the bag as if noticing it for the first time.

The clank had been audible in the small stone room, and all of the Marines turned to look at Kalhadore in surprise. He sighed faintly. Truly, I've had quite a bit of bad luck lately," Kuro said softly, swiftly reaching into the bag and pulling out his sword gloves before any of the marines could move. These were regular gloves, connected to a series of long katana from each finger, made to look like the claws of a cat.

Between one breath and the next the ensign flew back in a spray of blood as Kuro cut him from shoulder to waist, five long gashes opening up the youth and ending his life swiftly. The captain stood, but a slash from Kuro's other hand cut him down before he could pull out his own sword. And then Kuro was across the room, cutting down the two guards, spraying their blood across the walls before they could even blink. Kuro's speed and ruthlessness had always made him dangerous, and his time as a butler had not dulled his skill.

"Or perhaps, it is you who have the bad luck to cross my path." he said softly as the two guards bodies joined their fellows on the ground and Jango looked at him in both respect and fear.

With the four marines in the room silenced, and no alarm being raised Kuro turned to Jango. "What happened?" He growled, his sword 'fingers' encircling Jango's head, Kuro's eyes becoming somewhat wild behind his glasses. "I had everything planned everything, and you somehow ruin it at nearly the last moment? What did you do?!"

"We didn't do anything captain!" Jango said desperately, knowing that even hinting that he had done anything to jeopardize Kuro's plan would get him cut to ribbons just as ruthlessly as the Marines. "We were simply sailing the local ocean like you told us to. But then we saw this ship in the distance, a big galley just like ours, only a little bigger. But there didn't seem to be many people aboard, and the crew was getting bored, so we decided to try and take it."

Jango dared to shake his head very slightly, the side of his head knocking against one of the finger swords being held around his head. "It turned out to be this group of insanely strong bounty hunters. One of them was the Pirate Hunter Zoro! But

his captain was even stranger, this short girl with red hair who could walk on air! How are we supposed to know we'd run into someone like that!?"

"So it was mere chance and the crew becoming bored." Kuro said flatly, his eyes no longer wild but deadly.

"Yes!" Jango said, grateful that the man was actually listening.

For a moment Kuro just stood there, breathing deeply, then he pulled his hand away from Jango, pushing his glasses up his nose with the palm of that hand as he thought. "All right, here is what we're going to do. You are going to sneak out of this building right now. Put on one of the guard's clothes, and let's shave off that beard. Hold still a moment."

Jango flinched as Kuro's finger swords began to move across his face, giving him a **very** close shave before pulling back once more. "W-what now?" He said as he began to pull on a marines uniform. He'd chose one of the guards, thinking that covering his hair with a cap would make him that much less recognizable. Plus his was the only uniform in one piece, and miraculously only had a few splotches of blood here and there. "Most of the Marines here will know each other by sight won't they?"

"They'll be far too busy dealing with a breakout. I'll breakout the Nyaban brothers to join you, I assume that they are here?"

Jango flinched, shaking his head. "They're dead," he said bluntly. "The bounty hunters weren't exactly gentle."

"Can nothing go right today!?" Kuro growled. The two brothers were all he would've needed to slaughter Fuchsia village. The two of them and Jango alone could have allowed him to continue with his plan. But with them gone, the entire crew was now disposable.

And Kuro was angry. There was a barely controlled murderous rage just below the surface at all his plans having come to naught because of his old crew. Kuro had been having days upon days to stew about his plans coming to naught, and he needed an outlet. Going by what Jango had said it had been the crew who had pushed them to attack the bounty hunters, and in so doing endangered his plans simply because they were bored! The crew then would need to pay.

"Hide here until you hear screaming," Kuro said coldly making his way towards the door and throwing off his jacket behind them. "And don't let any blood get on that," he said as an aside before opening the door and disappearing down the corridor deeper into the base.

Jango stood there for a moment shuddering as he began to think maybe coming back to follow his former captain's orders wasn't the brightest thing he'd ever done. *Damn it, why'd I ever agree to this plan in the first place!?*

Outside Kuro marched forward, killing several Marines as in the corridors faster than they could scream, until finally someone survived long enough to shout the alarm "We're being invaded! Pirates!"

I didn't want to be a pirate anymore! Kuro thought to himself as he heard the term. The anger of the past two weeks of his plan, that he'd been working toward for years of humiliation serving a bratty wench and her moronic parents before her, crumbling around his ears was fueled even further. *Damn you all, I wanted to leave behind this life!*

"Shakushi!" Kuro disappeared from normal people's vision. His swords began to slice randomly into the marines who began to rush out in the corridor armed with sabers and muskets, and also the walls, gouging deep furors into the rock of the base, slicing entirely through doorways. The marines fell back, shouting and screaming, generally panicking and almost leaderless now.

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For a moment Usopp simply stopped and stared around him as the screams and shouts of alarm began to reverberate through the base. Then he began to look around desperately for a hiding place. *What the heck is happening!?* But there was no hiding place nearby. He was caught between the entrance to the jail and the rest of the base.

A second later and he had to run away from the noise of several marines coming up the staircase for a moment, hiding to one side behind a doorway before sneaking past them as they ran up into the rest of the base. The screams however were getting closer, and Usopp realized in horror that whoever was causing it was coming down towards him.

He raced down into the jail area, looking around him desperately for a place to hide, but all the jail cells were closed, and even as the pirates in them began to stir, he couldn't see anywhere to hide. With nowhere to hide, he turned, pulling out his sling and sling balls, pulling one back in facing the door, his knees knocking together in his fear, his arms shaking.

To his shock and growing horror Kuro appeared there, coming down the stairs calm as you please. He was armed with what looked cat paws with swords instead of claws, a few of the swords were even scraping along the rock of the floor.

The butler paused, one hand coming up to push his glasses up his nose with the palm of his hand, unmindful of the blood seeping down his swords. "Ahh, there you are Usopp," he said blandly.

"What, what's going on Kalhadore!?" Usopp shouted, raising his sling threateningly even as his legs and arms began to shudder so much they took the rest of his body with them. Fear beyond anything he'd ever known, even the fear of losing his mother, was going through him right now. "W, what are you doing?! What are those things and how are you..."

"I would think that was obvious," Kuro cut in smoothly, a small vicious sneer flitting across his face. "You think of being a pirate is mere play, I've told you over the past few days it is anything but. I just lied about how I knew."

Before Usopp could reply to that, a few of the men in the cells behind him started to cheer. "Captain Kuro! Amazing its captain Kuro! He's here to save us!"

"Stop calling me that name!" Kuro shouted and they all silenced immediately.

As Usopp watched the expression on Kuro's face changed from a sneering arrogance to a look of anger and rage coupled with disdain. "What do you think my plans for the last six years were about? To leave that life behind, to live a life of luxury! And what did you fools do? You decided to attack a ship of bounty hunters! All you had to do was follow my instructions, and my easy life would've been assured! Instead here we are, and I'll have to find another group of patsies to do my bidding!"

"Wait!" said one of the pirates, beginning to realize that maybe their captain wasn't here to save them. "We can still go through with the plan, it'll be easy!"

"No," Kuro said coolly. "You all must pay for ruining my plans in the first place. I was planning to dispose of you afterwards anyway, this is just moving up my timetable. The only one of you I have a real use for it is Jango."

Usopp's eyes had widened as he began to figure out what Kuro's plan must have been. "K, Kaya, you, you were planning to kill her weren't you!?"

"Of course! I've had to deal with that simpering little wench and her condescending kindness for years, all so I could kill her as I poisoned her parents and take their wealth for my own with no one coming after me! I wanted to own her fortune legally, and I will still, thanks to you and Jango. You, Usopp, will become the villain in this piece eventually, though it will take some time to put in motion!"

Kuro cut off as Usopp, his courage actually overcoming his fear for a moment, fired one of his special sling balls at the pirate. "You'll never hurt Kaya as long as I'm alive!"

"That is the idea!" Kuro deflected it, and shot forward, slicing at Usopp, who ducked faster than he ever thought he could move, only to still be caught by the backswing.

The strike cut Usopp from shoulder to side, the force of the attack hurling him back into the cage surrounding the weird head trophy set on the barrel. Usopp shakily raised his sling again, but the next ball, a regular ball, didn't even go an inch before Kuro smacked the ball back over Usopp's head. There was a tinkle of shattered glass, but Kuro had already turned around, leaving Usopp bleeding against the outside of the cage because three squads of marines had shown up behind him on the stairs, firing down at the pirate. "Shakushi!"

Usopp's eyes were wide, and his breath was coming in short gasps, but despite the pain, and the growing horror that he couldn't stop Kuro, he had noticed that odd sound of breaking glass. He turned slightly to watch the action and to look into the cage at the same time.

As he watched, the head's eyes rolled down, and it blinked, looking around it. It caught Usopp's gaze, and seemed to shake itself in place somehow, despite not actually having a neck to shake. Usopp noticed it actually began to hover a little bit off the

ground, looking still out of it somewhat because of, and Usopp suddenly realized he must be looking at some kind of Devil Fruit in action.

The head glared at Usopp, then past him, its eyes widening slightly, before it mouthed the words 'play dead!'

A second later Usopp screamed as he felt a blade slash across his chest and side, from one hip up to right below his armpit. The pain nearly forced him into unconsciousness, but he slumped forward slumped down, his eyes closing into slits. But Kuro hadn't even been attacking him personally, the technique Kalhadore, or Kuro or whatever his real name was, seemed to be using was some kind of blind attack, Kuro striking at everything around him.

Realizing this Usopp quickly smashed a few hidden bottles he carried all the time on himself of ketchup. They normally served as props in some of his pranks, but the mixture he had created looked like real blood, making his look even worse than it really was. Which was already pretty bad, Usopp thought having lost feeling in one of his legs at the hip, and his other hand was twitching badly.

He heard the screams and shouts continue, but had no mind to hear them as a voice spoke in his ear. "What the fuck is going on, kid?!"

Buggy the Clown actually had a lot of other questions right now, but that was the most prevalent one. The rest of what he wanted to know he could figure out after observing the uniforms of the marines and where he apparently had been kept prior to execution.

Opening one eye Usopp saw the head had made its way over to him, flying low on the ground so as to be out of sight. Deciding not to ask stupid questions about its impossible nature or who it was, Usopp simply answered the question, knowing he needed help to get out of here alive. "I, I don't know! That, he's a butler from my island, he's been there for years, but he's a pirate captain!"

"I get that part. But why's he slaughtering his own crew?" Buggy could still hear screams of 'No Captain please!' and other pleas for their lives from the pirates in the other cells. Many of them had already been slaughtered joining the marines whose bodies littered the corridors outside his cell and presumably beyond.

"I, I don't know," he said he, he wanted to, to kill someone and take their money legally, don't know how he would've worked that. But apparently he wanted to leave the pirate life behind, and he, he was going to kill them all anyway," Usopp gasped out, in quite a lot of pain from his wounds, but staying conscious from an effort of will and a bit of horror at what might happen to Kaya if he succumbed to his wounds.

Buggy would be the first to admit that he didn't have the best track record when it came to treating the majority of his own crew. But he sure as hell wouldn't kill them out of hand. And the idea of a pirate trying to escape the life like that, to leave aside his dreams and his flag.... Buggy had a 'cautious' streak, but he was still a pirate! He still craved adventure and the life at sea chasing his dreams, in his case treasure. The idea of any pirate simply hanging up his flag was the worst sort of stupidity to him. "Can you get the keys to my cell?"

With no other plan coming to mind Usopp agreed, knowing that his own ability would not be able to stop Kuro. He slowly dragged his body across the floor, pausing as more Marines appeared from above firing at Kuro from the stairwell once more, using the bodies of their fellows as cover. The black-clad butler again disappeared from his sight, suddenly appearing among them to slaughter them with an ease that utterly terrified Usopp.

He eventually reached the small wooden case that held the keys to all the cells, smashing it open with desperate strength. He grabbed them all, and now raced over, trusting to Kuro being busy to cover his movements. He began to try them one after another until finally one of them clicked, turning in the keyhole.

However, a third attack from Kuro caught Usopp in the back, slicing him open and nearly severing his spine, hurling him away in a splash of blood to land face down on the floor. "GAUAH!" Kuro didn't even notice, though he heard Usopp's scream and smiled even as his attack continued.

Damn, but the brat did it, not bad. Buggy thought as he saw his jail cell swinging open, and he quickly slipped his head out, grabbing up a small hand axe from the floor of the corridor between his teeth. Coming back into his cell he began to hack slowly at the barrel holding his parts, thankful the marines didn't have enough seastone to go around all their bases.

The noise of Kuro's attack covered any noise he was making, and soon he had it open, though his mouth hurt horribly from the exertion. His parts and the water within the barrel spilled out onto the stone of the cell's floor, and slowly the feelings of his parts returned to Buggy.

In the distance a final scream sounded, and moments later Kuro began to make his way back down, eager to wipe out his crew as he had promised to. Said crew had fallen silent after Usopp went down, horrified and trapped in their cells. Only a few of them had noticed Buggy, and those few stared slack-jawed as he moved out into the corridor, picking up a few discarded swords from the scattered bodies. He stopped and stared at Kuro, who stopped his deliberate stalking game to look at the man in front of him. "And who would you be, some nameless pirate these luckless marines captured?"

"Nameless?!" Buggy spat to one side. "Not nameless at all. What I am is a **real** pirate, not like you. You really want to give up the flag? You're a fucking coward. That boy has more courage than you," he said gesturing over to Usopp, who was slumped across the floor. "Taking on a pirate with the slingshot? That takes some major balls. Whereas you've spent years apparently planning to run away from your own past."

Buggy respected courage and the kid had impressed him being able to move after that first two attacks had hit him. He gestured around. "And that doesn't even consider your plan to slaughter your own crew!"

"Usopp is a fool, always dreaming about the pirate life while never understanding what it is like to always be hunted, to never rest! Yet so apparently are you." Kuro replied, shaking his head. "Still, what is one more corpse among the multitude?"

With that he disappeared again, using Nuke Ashi, or Stealth Foot to dash forward far faster than anyone there could follow. His attacks killed a few more of his crewmen who were right in back of their cell bars, as well as slicing said bars. But his actual target shouted out, "Bara-Bara parts!" And suddenly there were pieces of the man flying in every direction, not cut by Kuro's swords but under their own power.

Kuro stopped as he felt something slice along one cheek. Pausing his attack he raised one palm to wipe it his cheek and stare at the blood there.

"I prefer knives, but swords are good too." Buggy said conversationally as his body came back together facing the other pirate captain.

"What are you?" Kuro said coolly, his eyes narrowed behind his glasses.

"A part-part man," Buggy said smirking evilly, then he attacked and Kuro replied, no longer relying on Shakushi as he realized it's uncoordinated nature was working against him with this opponent. Yet every time Kuro tried to attack, Buggy simply separated.

Kuro just **couldn't** hit him! He even tried to attack Buggy's feet having noticed they never left the ground, but they too parted before his attack could hit. And he couldn't remove even one of his gloves to try and use a gun, Buggy pressed him too hard.

Whereas while Buggy couldn't quite keep up with Kuro's speed even out of Shakushi, he was able to slice Kuro several times in various ways. The cuts began to pile up, and Kuro retreated, scowling angrily. "Dammit! All of this, all this because my crew was stupid!"

Buggy laughed shaking his head. "You're the one that left your crew. And now you try to kill them off because of a mistake that started with you. What kind of pirate are you, you cat-scratching fucker?"

"The kind who's smart enough to know a pirate's life never amounts to anything! I wanted to leave that past behind and I will!"

"No you didn't," Buggy shot back coolly still just twirling his knives. "You wanted to set yourself up in the lap of luxury, not walk away from the life entirely until you could do it perfectly!" Buggy sneered, making the last word a whine almost. "But bad luck effects black cats too, and it's about time this cat got skinned!"

With that he charged forward, already coming apart as Kuro charged forward at the same time, now filled with despair and only hopping to get past Buggy and up the corridor before Buggy could come after him. It didn't happen.

A moment later, Buggy pulled himself back together, staring over his shoulder at the corpse of Kuro of the thousand plans before looking into the various jail cells.

"An entire Marine base wiped out by that bastard, and I'm going to be the one to take the blame, I just know it! But at least I got a new crew out of it, right boys?"

The brightest of them cheered, shaking their hands in the air. "That's right Captain Buggy!"

"Very good!" he said, tossing one of them the keys Usopp had been using before moving back over to squat down next to the kid. "Hey long nose, you still alive?"

Usopp blearily opened his eyes, looking at the pirate standing over him then past him to where Kuro's body lay. "You, you, th, thank you...."

"Yeah he's dead." Buggy said with a nod. "Thanks for your help. Was he right, have you always wanted to be a pirate?"

Usopp nodded weakly. "My, my father's a pirate, sailing with some, some big-wig in the New World. His stories, they always drew me in you know, I wanted to prove I could be a brave warrior of the sea just like him!"

"Did you now," Buggy said, smirking at the intensity in Usopp's eyes. *Pretty damn strong eyes for a boy on death's door.* Here was a dreamer who could possibly amount to something if he lived. "Your father got a name kid?"

"Y, Yasopp," Usopp replied.

Buggy's smirk widened as he recognized that name. "All right kiddo. I know your old man, and if you've got half the talent he does, maybe there's a place for you among my crew. First thing though, is you're going to get rid of that fucking stupid slingshot and we're going to get you a real rifle here among the wreckage. The sea is no place for a toy like that."

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The next four days passed quickly. Every morning Zoro and Luffy would train together with Luffy forcing Zoro out onto the air via Geppo where Zoro would continually fall into the ocean for a time, although he was getting better. And as Zoro had asked, Luffy also began Zoro's training in Tekkai, with predictable and very black and blue results.

In the afternoon, Nami trained with Luffy in the Bastard's training room. Nami's speed and dexterity continued to grow, as did her ability to actually predict attacks, above and beyond her Kami-E skills. She still refused to do any strength training however.

Luffy continued to try and get Sanji to agree to come with them, or with the aid of Owner Zeff though his 'help' didn't really help at all frankly. However, Luffy felt that he was slowly wearing Sanji down if only because Nami and Makino occasionally joined in. The triple threat attack from three good-looking ladies seemed to erode Sanji's resolve at times. But the moment they stopped the flirt attack Sanji's resolve to stay at the Baratie would grow again and they were back to square one.

The fifth afternoon there, Luffy was beginning to think maybe they should move on. Yes he liked Sanji, there was something about the guy which screamed there was more to him than he let on, and he knew anyone trained by the old man would be tough. But even so, Krieg had yet to show up, and for all his desire to have a dedicated cook, Makino could do the work just as well for a while longer.

Luffy was about to voice these thoughts to the others around the table when a scream from outside the restaurant shattered the peaceful atmosphere from a chef posted up in the Baratie's crow's nest. "It's Don Krieg!"

Soon everyone was looking out the nearest window. Makino found herself the nearest of the crew and she calmly joined the terrified customers, even pulling out a spyglass. "The flag has a skull with overlarge teeth, sideburns and an hourglass to either side... yes, that is indeed Don Krieg's flag, and I think that's his flagship too, though I've never seen pictures of it."

While the customers started to panic and even the cooks started to tremble Luffy and the others joined Makino at the windows. Luffy, looking through the spyglass, frowned. "Huh... you know Zoro, you might get your wish..."

"What?" Zoro asked quizzically.

"Just wait for it." Luffy said, smirking as he shook his head. "Something tells me this fight with Krieg isn't going to be anywhere near as hard as you feared though Nami."

Looking through the spyglass after he handed it to her, Nami could only agree. A few moments later the ship sailed close enough for Zoro to make out the details of it without the spyglass and he too understood.

The giant galleon, larger by at least half again than the Bastard, was a mess. The sails were ripped through in places. The figurehead of a furry demon from hell with larger than average teeth had a huge chunk of it sheared off. The main mast looked as if it had been sliced through at one point and hastily repaired right below the lower mast.

The regular civilians however hadn't waited around to see the state of the ship. They had all raced off to their various ships and scarpered within a mere few minutes of the pirate vessel being seen. This left the chefs and Luffy's crew as the only people aboard the Baratie, and the Bastard the only ship tied to the floating restaurant.

While the chefs began to gear up for a fight, Luffy and his crew took a moment to finish their meal. While they were eating the restaurant's main door slammed open. In walked Gin though he wasn't alone, he was actually leading a far larger man both in height and width, one arm under the newcomer's shoulders.

The second man was decently muscular, Luffy thought, but nothing to Garp. His hair was going grey like Garp's, and he had huge sideburns like his pirate flag. Around his head he was also wearing a wrapping as if he had taken a wound, but there was no blood on it.

"That is so tacky," Makino murmured to Nami, gesturing to what the man was wearing, a large fur-lined cape over cheetah-print shirt, the cape secured around his throat by a large golden chain.

"Ugh," Nami agreed, while Zoro and Luffy looked at one another shrugging their shoulders. "Almost as bad as Zoro's off-white shirt and wide hakama ensemble."

"Oy!" Zoro growled while Luffy laughed until Makino joined in while nearby a few of the chefs were looking at the small crew of bounty hunters as if they were crazy. The group had come to the realization that a fight wasn't going to break out soon, so had decided to just ignore the ongoing tension.

"Excuse me ..." the large man began, his voice sounding weak too, though Luffy had to wonder how much of that was fake. "C, could I have some food? If it, if it's money you want, I got plenty."

"...The hell?" Patty asked, looking over at another cook whose name was Carne. "This weak old guy is the fearsome Don Krieg?"

As Luffy and the others watched Krieg keeled over, unable to stand any longer, nearly taking Gin with him. "Don!" Gin yelled in shock, "Please, someone some food and water! He'll die at this rate!"

If he was looking for sympathy from the majority of the watchers, he was sorely disappointed. Patty, who was the closest cook, simply burst out laughing, "Aha, this, this really is Don Krieg!? How the mighty have fallen. Hey, someone call the Marines! They won't get another chance like this!"

Carne nodded, looking at the other cooks seriously while Gin shouted out about they had money this time. The Cooks however ignored that. "Don't anyone give him anything, letting Krieg get captured like this is the best thing that could happen. If we feed him, Kireg'll just attack the ship, he's known for his dirty dealing and treachery!"

"I, I won't do anything!" Krieg croaked, "If you give me food, I promise I'll sail away and leave you alone....Please...help me! I'll eat anything!"

He actually bowed from his knees, though Luffy noticed his jaw clenching a few times. Evidently the man wasn't used to begging. But either the act was working on Gin, or he was in on the scam, as Luffy noticed there were actual tears leaking from the grey-skinned man's eyes.

Patty however was unmoved as he had been by Gin's straits days ago. "Trying to earn some sympathy after the life you've led Kireg, that's low!"

"Move it Patty." Sanji said from behind the other cook, a plate and a bottle of wine balanced in one hand. Patty had but a moment to turn before Sanji's boot caught Patty square on the cheek, sending him flying to the side. "Here Gin, even if I'm willing to give him food, I don't want to get close to him."

"Th, thank you Sanji! Again you're our savior!" Gin said, grabbing the plate and plating it in front of his boss, who without further ado began to shovel the food into his mouth, ignoring the knife and forks in favor of using his hands.

"Sanji you damn fool, that's Don Krieg, the master of underhanded tactics, He's attacked peaceful ports and towns, while waving a Marine Flag, waved white flags at his enemies and attacked them when their guards were down! You really think he'll stay true to his word?!"

If Sanji had thought such a thing, he was soon proven to be wrong. Krieg gulped down the last of his food and swiftly reared up, crossing the distance between himself and Sanji in a single breath. Before Sanji could move back or defend himself a fist caught him in the chest sending him flying.

The Chef's cried out in horror as did Gin, proving the man hadn't been in on the plan Luffy thought, even as he absentmindedly reached out to catch Sanji "Don Krieg, I guided you here because you swore you wouldn't harm them and to hit the man who actually gave both of us food! That's beyOAAGH!"

Gin's words ended in a grunt of pain as Don Krieg's grabbed his shoulder grinding his bones together in his powerful grip. "Ah, I feel like I'm almost back to my normal self. This is a nice ship, I think I'll take it."

"Thanks for the catch, but why couldn't your sister be here right now?" Sanji muttered as Luffy sat him down. Luffy rolled his eyes at the man, not answering and Sanji turned away to glare at the two pirates.

Krieg didn't even spare Sanji a single glance, simply looking around at the cooks speaking as if his words were statements of what was going to happen. "I'll be needing a new one after all since my old one's so cut up. Yet I am prepared to be magnanimous. After you prepare food for a hundred men, I will let you all leave."

Carne growled angrily, muttering about making Sanji pay for this later before addressing Krieg. "You must be out of your traitorous mind! Feed a hundred pirates on your word after you just attacked Sanji, the one who fed you, screw that! Unlike the true blonde over there we actually have brains!"

As Sanji scoffed and Luffy and his crew chuckled, Krieg simply looked at the man blankly, like he simply could not believe the man had spoken such words. "That was not a request it was an order, and no one disobeys my orders!"

From where he had picked himself off the floor from Sanji's kick earlier Patty growled, shaking his head and getting to his feet. But then he stopped and stared at Sanji who was moving towards the kitchen. "Sanji what are you doing!? Can't you freaking learn from your mistake!?"

Sanji paused, taking his cigarette out of his mouth and blowing a smoke ring as he turned, his one eye locking onto Patty, his face a mix of laid back and serious. "What do you think I'm doing? I'm a cook, it's my duty as a cook to feed the hungry, and the starving, no matter what kind of scum they may be."

Luffy looked at his crew, who all, even Zoro who didn't like the cook for some reason, nodded. They liked Sanji's attitude, it made him a much more likeable character to realize he took his skills as a cook that seriously.

The cooks however didn't agree, moving to surround Sanji and block his path. Patty took it a step further with a blow to the back of Sanji's head which laid him out on the floor. "Hold this fool down!"

As the other chefs obey, he moved to a corner where a large rectangular object was laid against the wall, still shouting over his shoulder at Sanji. "I know full well that you've fed the people I've turned away for not having money, and I've ignored it because Owner Zeff did, and I can't say you were wrong to do it! But this time you're definitely wrong!"

He lifted his package and tore away the wrapping, revealing a huge rifle with a blunderbuss-like mouth. "Luckily we only have Krieg himself to deal with, if you think you alone are a match for the Baratie think again! We have pirates coming here looking to mess with us practically every week! We're more than prepared to deal with you!"

Patty raised the gun towards his target, who didn't even bother moving, simply staring back with dull, unimpressed eyes. "Since you finished your meal, how about some dessert, King of Deception Krieg! Eat this, a Indigestion Meatball Special!" Patty roared and fired the cannon at Krieg.

The cannonball hit Krieg square on and exploded, causing a massive wall of smoke which obscured the scene for a few moments. But after a few seconds it cleared, showing Don Krieg completely uninjured. "That meatball tasted like crap."

The shirt he had been wearing was gone now, revealing gold-colored armor which covered his entire upper body. "If you think you can give deserts like that to your customers, think again!"

Luffy smirked. "Hey Zoro here comes some practice for you. Watch the musketballs."

Zoro had a brief second to wonder what his captain was talking about when suddenly Krieg pulled out two pistols, while others appeared in small ports on his shoulder and forearms. Krieg fired, and Zoro flashed into action as Luffy seemed to disappear for a second. Zoro's white-hilted blade came out, sending a few tiny slivers of sharp air pressure forward, cutting into a few bullets to one side of the restaurant, and the walls behind them, cutting tiny swathes out of the walls.

On the other side of the restaurant Luffy did better. In his case he deflected the bullets with his fingers or tiny pennies in a show of strength and coordination that was astonishing. In all, only three bullets got through to impact among the chefs, and even as their victims fell screaming, Luffy stopped moving, smirking at Krieg. "Oops, look like your fancy toys aren't all they're cracked up to be, huh old guy?"

"Old, you damn brat, I...!" Krieg stopped as a giant sack landed in front of him, "What's this?"

"Owner Zeff!" The cooks shouted in shock, seeing their boss standing there, having disappeared into the kitchen while everyone had concentrated on Krieg and Patty's little drama.

"Food for a hundred men." Zeff said simply. He then turned to glare at Zoro. "And you, shit swordsman, are going to pay for the damages you caused."

While Zoro scoffed, looking away Krieg's eyes widened in shock, and he stumbled backwards slightly. "Did...did they say your name was 'Zeff?'"

"Sir! How could you give them that food! Krieg will never keep his word, he and his men will just attack the restaurant!" shouted a nameless cook, helping one of the injured chefs to his feet.

Zeff had a smirk on his face, "Hah, that's only if they have any fighting spirit left in them...isn't that right, you Grand Line dropout?"

Having not heard Gin's tale all the cooks recoiled, while Luffy and his crew simply watched the unfolding drama with amused or bored stares. "Yeah, that's nice, can we get to fighting already," Luffy muttered to Zoro who nodded his head. Makino and Nami rolled their eyes, but even they found Krieg to be less than terrifying after the captain and first mate's little exhibition. Makino also knew he was quite small potatoes in reality, while Nami had met far scarier people in her life.

Krieg was still looking like he'd seen a ghost, "Y...you're 'Red Leg' Zeff!" Recovering somewhat, Krieg smiled greedily staring at Zeff. "The peerless pirate captain and cook...so you're alive."

"So what? My being alive has nothing to do with you. As you can see, I'm a cook full time now," Zeff replied.

Krieg chuckled, manically. "To hear of Red Leg Zeff is to hear of the man who could kick so hard his shoes would be dyed red with the blood of his victims, who could break cliffs with only his legs and leave imprints on steel! The man who would never use his hands in a fight! HA, but look at you now, a full time cook you say, more like you can never put your red shoes on with only one leg!"

Out of the corner of his eye Luffy noticed that Sanji looked like he wanted to go tear Krieg apart, but he was still being held down by the other chefs. In contrast Zeff simply held up his hands. "As long as I have these hands, it doesn't matter if I can fight because I can still cook." He dropped them back to his side. "So are you going to get to the point, or are you going to continue flapping your shitty gums?"

"Red Leg Zeff! The man who once braved the waters of the Grand Line and returned uninjured! You must have kept a log of your voyage! I want it, hand it over now!" Krieg shouted.

"You've been to the Grand Line old man?" Luffy asked cocking his head thoughtfully. "I thought you were strong." *And Sanji's his student, makes Sanji an even better fit for my crew.*

"I did sail the Grand Line, and I did keep a log. But I won't be giving it to the likes of you. That logbook is the pride, the real treasure of me and my dead crew. It's much too valuable to give to a weakling."

"WEAKLING?!" Krieg roared, "I can throw an entire ship with my bare hands! How dare you call me weak?!"

"Ooh, a whole ship, big whoop," Luffy muttered. "Do it with one hand while running around as tigers chase you, then we'll talk."

"Garp's training again?" Zoro asked, while Nami blanched.

"Yep," Luffy said dolefully. "Grandpa Crazy really liked living up to my nickname for him y'know."

"Heh, There's no sense explaining it to an idiot." Zeff smirked at Krieg, not having heard this byplay.

"Then I'll take it from your corpse, you retarded cripple!" Krieg growled, clenching his diamond studded fist in front of him. "It's true that I came back defeated from the Grand Line, but even so, I'm the mighty Don Krieg! That dark sea which defies all rationality will not beat me! I had the strength, the ambition, the manpower! But I lacked information, that was my sole flaw! That is why I'll take that logbook from you! Once I have it, I'll reassemble my fleet and conquer the Grand Line! I'll find One Piece and become the Pirate King!"

Luffy just could not let that stand. "You want to be Pirate King! You?!" He scoffed, striding forward to glare up at the taller man. "Real strength doesn't come from toys like that, and it doesn't come from numbers. It comes from will. And if you retreated or let your troops take the fall for you, then you don't have any!"

Behind him Zeff smirked, while Sanji, now freed from the chefs who had been sitting on him, smiled lighting up a cigarette and blowing out a smoke ring. Luffy's crew also smiled, even Nami while Zoro grinned like a shark.

Krieg glared down at boy in front of him, fearlessly standing there and staring Krieg down. Everything in Krieg urged him to crush this gnat but he couldn't, not right now. The brat seemed to have some skill and it would take too long to deal with him, Krieg had to get his crew fed. "Because of your age I'll let that one go brat."

"Of course you will since your guns are empty and it doesn't look like you're man enough to fight without your little toys." Luffy scoffed, causing Krieg to stiffen.

"Oh god, yes please! Enough of the fucking posturing!" Zoro grumbled, his hand caressing the hilt of his sword.

Krieg stared at the small group of people at the table behind Luffy and started to laugh, "That's your crew? A woman, a brat with a sword and a little girl?"

"Him as well." Luffy said with a smirk and a thumb sent towards Sanji "So that's five. But we'll be enough to face the Grand Line together, unlike you and your shit crew."

"Don't fucking joke brat! My entire crew of five thousand men were wiped out on that hellish sea! all because we lacked knowledge!" Krieg bellowed.

"Which you could have gathered by asking people who had been there, or actually reading books." Makino said, shaking her head sadly. "Honestly, not knowing about Loge Poses? Assuming the weather will be even remotely normal? Are you that stupid, or just arrogant?"

"Shut your mouth you green haired whore! You don't know anythinNNG!" Krieg gasped, as Luffy's hand appeared from nowhere grabbing his jugular in fingers of steel.

"Fast." Zeff said with a nod, though he wasn't as impressed as he had been by Luffy' earlier exhibition of speed.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head when talking to my friends, or lose your ability to speak at all." Luffy said, his fingers lightly flexing, easily showing he could tear the older man's jugular out with just a twitch of his wrist.

He let go and stood back, smirking evilly now. "Take the food and go feed your fucking crew asshole, I'll give you a fighting chance at least, mostly so you can't whine about it afterward! We'll see who's the strongest here, you and your numbers, or me and my friends with our dreams and willpower!"

Krieg growled, but backed away, grabbing the food and leaving quickly.

Behind him Nami shook her head. "And that's supposed to be one of the strongest in East Blue? Sad." *And Luffy made him look weak so easily...* Again Nami's mind shut that thought down, the shadow of Arlong in her mind still there, immovable. But it was cracking, and those cracks were spreading fast.

"I just want to be clear on this. You're letting him go feed his crew and prepare for a fight because you think it'll be more fun to fight him at full strength?" Sanji asked, sucking in a lungful of glorious nicotine.

"Yep. Got a problem with that?" Luffy asked, smirking at the blond cook.

"Nope," Sanji said smirking back, even sparing a moment to nod at Zoro. "That's just fine by me."

Gin, who Krieg had left behind glared at Luffy and Zoro for a moment before bowing his head to Sanji and Zeff sorrowfully. "I'm so sorry Sanji! I never intended this! I had no idea this would happen!"

"There's no need to apologize, punk, you didn't do anything wrong, nor did any of the cooks here." Zeff replied. "We each did what we thought was the right thing to do."

"OWNER ZEFF! How could you side with Sanji! It's his fault we're going to be attacked, and you just go and make the enemy even stronger!" shouted more than one chef, their words a cacophony of betrayed accusation sent toward Zeff and Sanji both.

"SHUT UP YOU STUPID EGGPLANTS!" Zeff shouted, rounding on them angrily. "Do any of you know what it feels like to starve?! Do any of you know what it feels like to be so hungry you want to die just to end it?!" He went on, and Luffy and his crew watched Sanji's head dip down, his hair shadowing his face.

Ah, that was it, Luffy thought with a nod. It made sense and frankly again, just like his feeding the pirates in the first place, made Sanji more interesting above his obvious skills. A man who nearly starved on the sea but refused to leave it, that said something to Luffy.

The chefs all looked at their boss in shock. "Not one of you numbskulls know how terrifying and painful it is to be lost at sea with no food or drinkable water! The difference between you and Sanji is that he **does**!" The cooks made to turn to look at Sanji who simply glared at them, unwilling to take their pity and Zeff went on. "For now, there's no use crying over what's happened. If you want to leave, there's the door."

The cooks all hardened their gazes and gripped tightly onto their weapons, all of whom made Luffy remember Ukyo and her spatula since they were cooking implements done ridiculously large. "I'm staying right here. I couldn't live with myself if I left without a fight." Patty said, evidently a kind of spokesman for the rest of the riffraff.

"Same here. There ain't anywhere else for me to go." Carne muttered. "Ain't no place for most of us really."

"Wh-what?!" Gin yelled hysterically, "Haven't you all realized how strong Don Krieg is already? You're all going to die!"

"What are we, chopped liver?" Luffy asked, looking at Zoro, who shrugged, uncaring. Luffy turned back to the action. "Hey Gin!"

Gin turned from trying to convince the chefs to leave, seemingly only remembering there were others present as he did. "What?"

"How long did you all survive on the Grand Line? I'm betting on... four, five days." Luffy ignored Gin stiffening in anger and fear as Luffy's question brought back the hellish memories. "But I'm wondering if it was just the weather or something else which did that to your ship." *Or rather someone. I just want to know who...*

Cringing, Gin held his head, his eyes wild. "S, seven days...for seven days we sailed, no direction, no way to tell where we were, no way to tell if we were making any progress, as snow, storm, beasts and monstrous waves tore at us, like the whole

world had gone mad! Then on the seventh day, just as the seas calmed down, **he** appeared!"

A full body shiver gripped Gin from head to toe, but he went on describing what had occurred. "One instant we thought we were safe then **he** started sinking our ships one by one! If it wasn't for a freak storm that picked up our ship and hauled it away, even the flagship would have been sunk!"

"He?" Sanji asked, curious as Zoro's eyes widened in sudden supposition, staring out the door to the ship than over at Gin, gripping his swords tightly.

"To think the entire fifty-ship Krieg Fleet...it was ALL sunk by one man! Impossible!" Sanji and all the cooks looked completely terrified of the thought. "The entire fleet was crushed by one man?!"

Even Nami and Zoro looked unsettled. Makino and Luffy however didn't which, when Zoro and Nami realized it, was rather telling. Luffy simply nodded his head making go-on motions with one hand. "Yes, but do you know what his name was, what did he look like?"

Gin shook his head. "I don't know his name...but he was the most terrifying man I've ever come across, with, with this terrifying gaze! It haunts me even now the glare from those yellow, hawk eyes!"

Zoro stiffened, shooting a look at Luffy who slowly nodded his head.

For his part, Zeff simply crossed his arms, looking almost as blasé at the story as Luffy and Makino. "Then it was his work for sure." Gin lifted his head and stared, "Hawk Eyes alone isn't much proof...but his handiwork proves it for you."

"Hawk Eyes Mihawk, the man I've been looking for all this time." Zoro breathed, his own eyes wild now with eager battlelust.

"So, why did he attack you?" Sanji asked, after draining his cigarette down to the nub. "Did he bear you some grudge?"

"Perhaps you disturbed his nap?" Zeff said, shaking his head. "I remember he was reported to be rather cranky if woken up out of the blue."

"THAT'S BULLSHIT!" Gin roared, "He'd destroy an entire fleet for that?!"

"That's the kind of place the Grand Line is brat, besides, it was just a thought." Zeff retorted. "No need to get all irritated by the truth of how weak you are in comparison to the real world."

Luffy laughed suddenly, a carefree excited sound without a hint of fear in it that caused both Nami and Makino to smile. "God I am so looking forward to this, screw staying in East Blue for another month, we are so going to the Grand Line as soon as possible! "

"Looks like I made the right decision, signing up with you Luffy." Zoro said, his own laughter joining Luffy's only even more wild. "My goal lies along the same path as yours!"

Sanji shook his head. "You're the type to rush to your deaths, aren't you, a pair of idiots. Just don't drag your sister down with you!" He looked around suddenly. "Where is the beautiful Ranko anyway? I would have thought she'd come and see what was going on at least."

"Oy, leave out the 'idiot' part of that statement Curly-cook." Zoro said, smirking at the blonde chef and incidentally taking his attention off the 'missing' Ranko before Luffy had to. "Ever since I decided I would become the greatest swordsman in the world, I cast away any attachment to life. If I die in pursuit of my dream, that's all it was worth. I chose this path, so the only one who can call me an idiot is me."

Luffy grinned, his dark eyes gleaming with battle light, and even more conviction. "Same here." To one side of him, Makino smiled shaking her head but saying nothing while beside her Nami stared between the two men of the crew, memories of her dreams and the love of map-making she'd had while younger warring with the here and now.

By this point Krieg's rage at how Luffy had manhandled had reached the boiling point. His voice began to carry over the intervening water, either browbeating his crew into action, and they came boiling up to the railings of their damaged flagship, which began to slowly move toward the Baratie.

Seeing this Luffy and Zoro moved to the door smirking over at the various chefs. "Don't worry we're after Krieg's bounty anyway. You don't have to dirty your ickle hands." Luffy taunted, and just like he had expected all of the cooks took umbrage at that.

All except Zeff, who retaliated in kind. "That bounty of his might just cover the repairs to my restaurant after you're done. Your swordsman friend practically carved up half my restaurant with that little stunt with the bullets!"

"He's still working on control true." Luffy said with a smirk, shaking his head. "But I would wager that those repairs would only take about 30,000 bell, not the 24,000,000 Krieg is supposed to be worth."

"I'll be the one to decide that," the old man said grumpily, marching out behind them at the lead of his chefs.

"You see," Krieg was saying as they came out onto the deck pointing at the floating restaurant. "It will be perfect! No one will suspect..."

Luffy's eyes suddenly narrowed, his danger senses tingling. He wasn't very good at Observation Haki, not yet. It was easily the worst of his three Haki types, but his danger sense was extremely well-attuned. He watched as something cut into the ship from the side cutting it entirely in half as easily as if the large ship had been made out of bread rather than metal and wood.

"Oh my god How, wh, what just happened!" Nami gasped from where she and Makino had come out behind the boys, her eyes wide and staring, as was Johnny and Yosaku's, who had taken the rowboat over to the restaurant a few minutes earlier from the Bastard, which was anchored a ways off the other side of the Baratie. Makino had sent them off to move the ship away when Krieg's flagship had first been spotted.

"Someone cut it with a sword strike," Luffy murmured, scratching at his hair under his straw hat thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"You said that you still can't cut iron with a Rankyaku, right?" Zoro said calmly, though his hands were now clenched over his swords, and he was staring forward, his intense face belying his casual words.

"That's right, not yet. I mean I could use some other techniques to cut steel, but I promised myself I wouldn't use those in the East Blue, it would be like taking candy from babies." Luffy murmured in the same tone, his own eyes staring through the waterspout and panicking people as the ship began to capsize starting from the areas newly cut. "There's someone there," he said, before Zoro could comment on what he'd just said.

Nami however had made a note of it, and she gawked at him. Beside her Makino simply shook her head, her own eyes intent on the activity in the water. "I wonder who it could be. I haven't heard any rumors of any of the powers of the world coming to the East Blue..."

"It's not him Makino, I'd be able to tell, sorry." Luffy said absentmindedly, causing Makino to sigh sadly, though she didn't turn away. For her part Nami wondered what he meant by saying he would be able to tell, placing that alongside what Luffy had just said earlier.

"You," shouted a pirate clinging to the top of a bit of wreckage as it sank deeper into the water. "What are you doing here?! Didn't you kill enough of us already, why did you have to follow us!?"

The man so addressed was tall, extremely tall, so much so that he looked like he was about 2 feet taller than Zoro or Luffy. He was even taller than Krieg by at least a foot, but he was thin, his body built for speed and dexterity rather than strength. He was currently sitting in a small, seemingly flat ship shaped like a coffin with a cross stuck in the center, which he was using as the back of his chair currently.

He wore black pantaloons and a long cloak both of them black and dark purple. Around his bare neck he wore a chain with a small cross hanging from it. On his back he wore a large sword, almost as large as he was tall, with a large gold cross hilt, and a slightly curved, very wide black blade.

The man had a neat goatee, and yes, yellow hawk-like eyes which stared dispassionately back at the pirate that had so addressed him. "To kill time," he said simply.

"Screw you!" said more than one pirate, opening fire with their pistols. But the man didn't even bother standing up, simply pulling out his sword and flicking it

lightly a few times, that was all. The bullets were all redirected by the air pressure, impacting the ocean all around him.

A pirate nearby on a piece of flotsam which had drifted to bump against the floating restaurant's side shook his head. "What, what just happened there?"

Zoro stood forward, smiling intently his eyes wild. "He redirected them with air pressure," he said simply. *He made it so easy, and didn't damage anything else either like I did earlier!*

"Magnificent skill!" he shouted, addressing the man on the boat. "Just as I would expect from the greatest swordsman in the world!"

"Of course," the man said simply, looking at Zoro with only slightly more interest than he had the pirates earlier. "Strength without power is simple brutality. A swordsman must have both strength and skill."

"Well said!" Zoro nodded, leaping forward, hopping from one piece of flotsam to another until he arrived on a portion of their flagship which had settled into the water and now seemed stable. "You are definitely the man I have been searching for! I challenge you, Hawk Eyes Mihawk!"

"Foolish," the man said, even as he stood up from his own boat, leaping over onto the same piece of flotsam that Zoro stood on. "A swordsman should know how to analyze the strength of his opponent. I am beyond you."

To one side Krieg stared at this confrontation scowling angrily, but willing to see how it played out. The ease with which Hawk Eyes had utterly destroyed his entire fleet and now just cut his own flagship in half was enough to keep him still for now despite his normal arrogance.

"How will I know that unless I try!" Zoro said, pulling out his bandanna and tying it over his hair, placing his white-hilted sword in his mouth as he took out two of the swords he had taken from the Bastard's armory that morning. There was nothing special about them, they were just heavy katanas, but they would serve. He hoped.

A few of the pirates saw Zoro like this, and one of them gasped aloud. "That, that's Pirate Hunter!"

"The Demon Pirate Hunter?" Krieg murmured, now interested in spite of himself as to what was going to happen, while more than a few of his crew cried out in shock, shouting at one another as they wondered how this was going to go.

Hawk Eyes on the other hand simply seemed amused. "It seems you have a modicum of notoriety, but this is East Blue, the weakest of the oceans, your name matters not at all." Hawk Eyes pulled out a tiny knife from the cross he had been wearing on his around his neck.

"What are you doing with that toy!?" Zoro asked angrily.

"Even if you have challenged me, I do not intend to seem a bully. Indeed I should apologize, this is the smallest blade I have." Mihawk replied.

Zoro's eyes practically glowed with fury and he crouched down, a sword held close to his body on either side of him as he glared at his target. "We'll see if you sing a different tune in a second! **Onigiri!**"

With that he charged forward his body disappearing to most of those around him, his swords flashing out in an intricate display of sword work, Santoryu against the tiny knife in Hawk Eye's hands. For his part Hawk Eyes blocked the attacks with seeming ease, though his brow furrowed as he felt his knife begin to crack under the impacts. *Interesting, he is far stronger than he appears. Let's see if he has anything else under his sleeve.*

With that Hawk Eye's began to bat aside Zoro's attack, almost getting through Zoro's defenses in a millisecond. But Zoro stepped back quickly, dodging to one side and off the portion of the shattered ship they were currently fighting on. He began hopping in midair for a moment as he brought his swords back over his shoulder and launched out "Thousand Yard Slash!" this was the long range attack he had been working on, the more serious version of the air pressure waves he'd used earlier to deflect Krieg's musket balls inside the restaurant.

A long-range attack from a swordsman in East blue! Hawk Eyes thought to himself, stepping slightly backwards putting all of his weight on his back foot as he thrust his little dagger forward, catching the long-range attack on the blade, which shattered under the impact.

"Feel like taking this more seriously now?" asked Zoro, still hopping in midair if rather haphazardly, breathing deeply as his arms began to send twinges of pain to his brain.

"You have learned one of the six Rokushiki. Yet even so, you should still know that this battle is beyond you," Hawk Eyes said, reaching over his shoulder. "However, for your courage and what measure of skill you have achieved in this, the weakest of the Five Seas, I will give you this honor. The greatest sword in the world, the Black Blade."

As soon as he had to sword in his hand Hawk Eyes glared at Zoro, bringing all of his **will** to bear on the other swordsman. Dracule Mihawk was not called Hawk Eyes just because he had the eyes and narrow face of a predator. His gaze had a power that could freeze lesser men, a sort of personalized Haki attack that he had developed over the years.

Zoro shivered under the weight of that glare but did not retreat hopping down to land once again on the ship facing Hawk Eyes. After a second Hawk Eyes let up the pressure and shook his head somewhat admiringly before Zoro attacked again.

Immediately it was apparent that Hawk Eyes had not only been holding back but held back by his choice of weapon. The giant blade flicked this way and that as light as a rapier in his hand, but blasted aside Zoro's attack like the massive near-claymore it was in size.

In contrast, despite his years of training before Luffy and the weeks since with him, Zoro was completely outclassed. His swords could barely deflect Hawk Eyes attacks, and his eyes and body could barely keep up with the speed of his opponent. *It can't be, it can't be this far away, the real world can't be this far away* Zoro thought to himself angrily, not having really believed Luffy's warnings on the subject.

The exchange lasted a full minute, instead of going for a slash at Zoro's head Hawk Eyes had feinted that way. This pulled his opponent's defenses entirely out of position and Hawk Eyes stabbed forward, aiming at Zoro's upper chest.

But even though he couldn't get his swords back in position to block, Zoro still had his latest training to fall back on. "Tekkai!" he shouted, toughening his body right before impact.

Then there was a sound like a slab of meat being stabbed, a 'SHLICK' noise which reverberated around the suddenly still scene. Hawk Eyes locked eyes with Zoro, who glared back at him. The Black Blade should have stabbed Zoro straight through, but Hawk Eyes hadn't put enough strength behind the thrust to break Zoro's Tekkai. Even so, the blade's tip had sunk in a good few cm. into Zoro's flesh.

"Zoro!" Nami screamed, Makino closed her eyes and shook her head. Luffy's hands clenched on the Baratie's railing so hard it broke like cheap cardboard under his hands.

Beside him Johnny and Yosaku both roared aloud, "Zoro-Aniki!" and made to charge forward.

But Luffy swiftly grabbed them both by the scruff of their necks, slamming them down face first into the deck. "Don't! Don't dishonor Zoro like that, and don't get yourselves killed, you damn fools. This is a fight between swordsmen, you should know what that means to him!"

Despite his words to them however, Luffy was having his own issues with not interfering. Even his Haoshoku began to leak out slightly, causing Zeff to look at him sharply. But after a second he turned his attention back to the fight as Luffy did.

For a moment the two swordsmen simply stood there and Hawk Eyes' eyes narrowed. "Why do you not retreat?"

"I don't know. I just know that backing away would be more painful than death, and I can't do it."

This boy, Hawk Eyes thought, staring into the eyes locked with his own. They were not the eyes of a dead man or a defeated man, nor were they angry or anything else. Accepting, challenging, and with a hidden will behind them, a vibrant, powerful will even here on the edge of death. *It has been a long time since I saw eyes like that.*

Hawk Eyes pulled his blade back, shaking his head as Zoro grunted, blood now leaking heavily down his chest. "Boy, what is your name?"

"Roronoa Zoro!" Zoro said as he brought his swords into an odd position, the hilt of one pressed to a right angle to the hilt of the other as he held them out in front of his body, making a strange sort of pinwheel formation with the sword of his mouth.

"Roronoa Zoro," Hawk Eyes said slowly as he pulled back his blade, smiling thinly. "I will remember it."

"Thank you for that," Zoro said. "But I don't intend to die here!" With that he charged forward. "Santoryou Secret Technique, Three Thousand worlds!"

Hawk Eyes met him, and in a single brutal attack slashed through the technique and out the other side, shattering the two blades in Zoro's hand in return for two tiny cuts, one on his cheek, the other on his shoulder. But that was all and both men knew who had won.

I lost, I lost. I never really thought I would. But it this was on my ambition was worth then I can accept that too. Zoro thought. With that he turned to face Hawk Eyes as Hawk Eyes did the same.

The greatest swordsman in the world frowned as Zoro held out his arms to either side, the white tilted blade sheathed now in one hand. "What are you doing?"

Zoro grinned almost manically, but made no move to run, simply staring death in the face. "A wound in the back is a swordsman's shame."

At those words Hawk Eyes actually allowed himself a smile while those watching had various reactions, with Sanji's being the most negative. "Well said!" With that Mihawk slashed forward, his blade opening Zoro up from one shoulder down to his hip hurling him backwards in a welter of blood to land several feet behind where he had previously been standing.

Luffy **lost it**, he lost it completely. The sight of Zoro falling back, his blood spraying everywhere from that strike broke Luffy's self-control as if it had never existed. Not only of himself, but of the demon within him, the Haoshoku.

Hawk Eyes had barely a single moment to register the fact that someone was using Haoshoku nearby before he was flying backwards, two of his ribs broken from a blow that he had barely seen fast enough to dodge slightly, just enough to keep it from

doing more damage. He quickly recovered, bringing up his sword blade to block the next few blows. This allowed him to notice, with growing astonishment, that his attacker's entire body was now black with Armament Haki. *A straw hat? Is this boy...*

Luffy mindlessly began to pummel Mihawk's defenses, not noticing the effect his unleashed Haoshoku was having on the people around him. Most of the pirates and chefs collapsed, their wills crushed under the weight of Luffy's. Carne, Patty, Gin and a man who had pulled himself out of the ocean wearing a very odd set of armor held on for a brief moment before collapsing. Krieg held on to his mind, but his knees buckled, and he bit down on his lip drawing blood to keep from joining his crew wondering what the hell this was.

Of Luffy's crew, Makino had buckled at first, but pushed herself to her feet quickly. She had felt this pressure before, not just from Luffy but from Shanks. The red-haired pirate was a master at both using and actually targeting his Haoshoku toward a single individual. She liked to think that it was as much her own understated willpower as it had been her body which had attracted Shanks.

Beside her Nami went to her knees, shivering and shaking, her will nearly crushed under the weight of Luffy's until Makino wrapped an arm around her. She didn't recover after that, but she also didn't fall apart further.

Even Sanji had done well, falling to his knees at first before shakily pushing himself up right. He looked around wildly, only to stop as he stared at Zeff, who had seemingly borne up under whatever this attack was without even flinching. The old man looked at his ward and smirked. "That feeling boy, that is conviction, **will** given physical form! That boy has the Hoashoku! Hah, I never thought I'd see something like this in East Blue!"

"B, but it's not effecting Hawk Eyes at all! He's going to die just like his friend!" Sanji spluttered.

"Does it look as if he cares!? Look at his eyes boy. Those are the eyes of a dreamer who's willing to put his life on the line to achieve his dream. Just like that swordsman's eyes. People like that, they'll never back away, they'll never back down. They will keep on going to achieve their dreams or die trying, and you better make certain they're dead!"

Zeff chuckled, shaking his head before almost glaring at Sanji. "I remember a boy once who had the same look in his eyes. I wonder where he went?"

At that Sanji looked at him sharply then away, scowling angrily and biting into his cigarette so hard that he bit all the way through it. Then he caught sight of the girls, and his chivalry came to the fore. "Damn it Shitty Strawhat, cut it out!" he shouted. "You're hurting the ladies!"

But Luffy was in no position to care, simply filled with the desire to make the bastard in front of him pay, his rage overriding all of his self-control. It even made him forget some of his own skill in favor of simply caving in Mihawk's head with his fist.

"Bah, best to see if that swordsman's still alive shitty eggplant, I think I can see his chest still moving." Zeff said, moving forward himself to the two combatants. "I'll deal with this."

"Calm down!" Mihawk shouted, even as he was forced backwards. The boy was insanely fast, fast enough to make Mihawk work at keeping his fists away, and even if his Haki was slowly starting to fade, his speed wasn't going down, whereas his broken ribs were beginning to slow Mihawk. "Your friend is not dead!"

As Sanji reached him Zoro gasped, his eyes snapping open as he coughed up blood. He could feel the pressure on his body, but his almost unconscious state just then had actually helped somewhat in shielding his psyche from it. He held up his sword, pushing Sanji's arms away. "L, Luffy, can you hear me!?"

Luffy's attacks paused, and he turned in place, his Haki fading in his body as he stared at the white-hilted blade being held up to where he could see it over the Baratie's gunnels. When he spoke, his voice was ragged as he tried to regain his self-control, glaring between the sword and Hawk Eyes. "I, I can hear you Zoro."

Across from Luffy Mihawk's lips formed a broad grin which few indeed had ever seen. *This swordsman, this Roronoa Zoro! Wounded so badly, yet he was able to not only push himself back into consciousness but also to push aside his captain's Haoshoku! There is indeed a will there, a strong magnificent will! And this boy, my god, hahahaha, they will be powers in this world!*

"It is too early for you to die Roronoa Zoro!" Mihawk shouted, turning slightly away from Luffy to stare at the Meitou blade. "My name is Dracule Mihawk! Learn about yourself! Learn about the world! Become strong, and **surpass me** Roronoa Zoro!"

For a moment everyone was quiet as Luffy slowly began to reign in his Haoshoku, glaring at Mihawk, his teeth clenched. Then Zoro responded, not to Mihawk, not directly, but to Luffy. "S, sorry for worrying you... I know that if I don't become the Greatest Swordsman, you'll be embarrassed as my captain."

He coughed out blood, and Sanji grit his teeth, seeing the man who should be on death's door struggling on. "I swear...that until they day I fight him and win...I'll never lose again! Any problems with that, Pirate King?!"

Mihawk's eyes widened, as did his grin. "Is that your dream boy? That is an even more dangerous road than trying to surpass me."

"Like I care," Luffy retorted, the pressure still leaking from him. "It's my dream, and I will give my life to achieve it!"

"Well said," Mihawk replied for the second time that day, turning around as Luffy did the same leaping back over to the Baratie.

Now finished reining in his Haoshoku Luffy moved towards Nami quickly. She was the weakest of his friends and he knew she would have suffered under it the most. She flinched as she caught sight of him, and he winced.

"Easy, I'm still me, Nami." he said softly. "Luffy, the guy with the weird curse, the one who you say shouldn't be allowed to navigate my way out of a bathtub. The one who you smack on the back of the head on a near daily basis for damaging the Bastard. Don't, don't look at me like I'm a monster, please." Luffy finished, his voice dropping to near pleading.

Nami looked up at him, and then seemed to shake herself. The fear slowly disappeared, and she reached out touching Luffy's face wonderingly. "You, you've been holding that in this whole time?"

"Yeah," Luffy replied, sighing in relief. "I can explain it later if you want. I was thinking of training you in something that's kind of connected to that ability eventually anyway."

Nami nodded slowly, and Luffy tried to analyze the look in her deep brown eyes. There was no fear there now, only some kind of wonder, astonishment and... was that hope? *Huh, maybe some good will have come from my losing control like a fucking child!* Luffy thought, castigating himself severely. He could have done irreparable harm to his friends, and those other guys he supposed, by losing control like that.

With a sigh Luffy stood up, pulling his straw hat off his head and placing it gently on Nami's head. "Look after that for me, will ya?" As she stammered a reply, knowing full well how Luffy felt about his hat, he turned to Makino, who nodded at him, her arms still around Nami.

With the two ladies seen to Luffy turned back to the sea in time to see Krieg who had apparently recovered somehow and begun to fire on Hawk Eyes. The swordsman however simply deflected or ignored the weapons fired at him, sailing away.

"What the hell are you?" Sanji asked, glaring up at Luffy. "You and that swordsman, what the hell was that!?"

"Will made manifest," Luffy replied with a shrug. He looked over at Zeff, noting that Krieg was the only one of the pirates that had been able to survive his Haoshoku, though he was in the process of beating his crew back to life. "Hey, I know it's, y'know, tradition for the two pirate captains to have an epic fight, but frankly I couldn't care less about it right now. You mind if I end this quick?"

"Feh, it wouldn't have been a fight anyway shitty moron. It would have been like watching a cat play with a mouse." Zeff shrugged, shaking his head. With that he turned, rousing his cooks with sharp kicks from his peg leg.

Luffy flinched internally at the imagery, but then shook his head, too tired to put up with Krieg. A second later Sanji almost lost track of him as he leaped into the air and over to Krieg and his pirates. The pirates had barely a moment to look up before a Rankyaku slammed into them.

"You mothe-GAHH!" Krieg fared no better, having a bare second to realize Luffy was there before a single punch slammed into his chest plate and through it his ribs. Those ribs splintered, filling his organs with shrapnel including his heart, and he died before he could realize he was under attack.

Luffy stared down at the body dispassionately, then grabbed it up and hauled it back to the Baratie as Sanji and a few of the other chefs stared in shock. "How's Zoro?"

Makino and Nami had joined Sanji and after quieting the chef's worries about them, begun to work on their first mate. Neither looked up, but Makino replied quickly. "We might need to get him to a doctor, but I think I can stitch the wounds closed. He'll live, but he won't have his full strength for at least a few weeks."

As Sanji stuttered at the idea it would only take a few weeks for Zoro to recover from that heinous a wound, Luffy nodded, waving off Nami's attempt to give him his hat back. "You look like you need it more than me Nami." He said simply then smiled weakly. "Besides, this just puts one of my treasures on another you know? All my crew is my treasure."

Nami blinked at that then blushed, before grinning brightly up at Luffy, one of very few completely real smiles she had given him since they met.

In her mind, Nami was going through what could be termed an epiphany. Luffy was stronger than Arlong. Her mind and emotions now had to agree on this, indeed her nightmare of Arlong could simply not stand up to the reality of the strength Luffy was hiding within him. And he was her friend, and had always, **always** treated her like one. Luffy had never even questioned her about her past, never caring about it or about why she needed money. Instead he simply held out his hand, waiting for her to be ready to take it.

Which Nami now realized she was ready to do. "I, I want to talk to you later, okay Luffy?"

Luffy nodded then turned to Zeff. "So, since I saved your restaurant, you think it's alright if I take Sanji with us?"

"OY! Don't talk about me like I'm a shitty parcel you can barter for, you shitty straw hat! Even if Ranko, Nami and Makino all asked me I won't leave this restaurant." Sanji shouted, then walked off, muttering curses under his breath as Zeff chuckled, motioning a few of his chefs forward to start tying up unconscious pirates, making extra certain they tied up Gin and the armored man as tightly as possible.

A few hours later, Luffy found Sanji sitting alone, leaning against the fish head. "Yo."

Sanji looked up at him and Luffy smiled, squatting across from him. Sanji looked at him, but Luffy simply waited, not saying anything for a bit. "You really believe that thing you said to Gin don't you, that risking your life is the only way to achieve your dream?"

"It is in this world," Luffy shrugged then smirked, reaching forward to poke Sanji's shoulder. "I came out here to ask you again to join my crew, but why did dreams come to mind? Do you have one? Or should that be, did you have one once, considering how ya don't want to leave this restaurant no matter how hard Zeff tries to push you out of the nest."

Sanji scowled, puffing on his cigarette for a long moment and when he spoke he replied to Luffy's comment rather than his questions. "I know that, he's been trying to drive me out for over a year now. But how am I supposed to repay my debt to the old man if I don't stay here and help him with his own dream?"

"Do you think that's what he wants? Or would he rather see you chase your own dream?" Luffy replied, not asking about what debt Sanji had to Zeff. He had something of an idea, but he didn't need to know the details.

Again Sanji fell silent for a moment, turning away as he remembered Zeff's words from earlier as well as the astonishing **pressure** Luffy had let out during his brief clash with the Shichibukai. Then he grinned suddenly. "Hey, have you ever heard of All Blue?"

Following that conversation, Sanji had a long talk with Zeff interspersed with a lot of fighting and cursing. Neither were really good with emotional stuff, but eventually Sanji finally realized that yes, Zeff wanted to see Sanji out chasing his dream, and no, he didn't want Sanji to keep trying to repay him. Sanji went to Luffy and asked to

join his crew a few moments after, though was disappointed to hear that 'Ranko' was down with a headache.

Luffy wanted to wait for just the right moment to spring his curse on the cook. He wanted to be well away from the Baratie when he did, just in case Sanji had second thoughts. He didn't think Sanji would now that his dream to find All Blue had been brought back to the fore, but better safe than sorry.

Later that night Luffy waited, sitting against the Bastard's main mast, watching the door into the captain's quarters. Nami eventually came out with his straw hat still on her head. She paused in the doorway for just a moment as she saw him there then came forward.

Wordlessly Luffy stood up, moving gently towards her, standing an arm's length away from her. Nami crossed the distance, burying her head against his chest. Luffy's arms went around her, and he held her as she quietly began to sob. Then eventually she said the words he'd been longing to hear for weeks now. "Luffy, help me!"

Later, Luffy gently put Nami to bed, coming out of the room only to find the rest of his small crew waiting. He looked at them all, then Makino in particular cocking an eyebrow. "We didn't hear everything," she said simply. "But we heard her crying. I had to sit on Sanji rather hard, but Zoro helped."

Luffy nodded and filled them all in on Arlong as much as he felt Nami would want them to know. There was no need to mention the threats he made toward her sister, and how said sister could 'pay her way', or some of the looks he'd sent Nami in the past few years. Those he would keep to himself and use as fuel when it came time to face Arlong in person.

"So we're going to slice this bastard in half. Are you sure we're not pirates instead of heroes?" Zoro quipped, grimacing from his wounds but still game.

"No," Luffy said with a very dangerous smile on his face. "We're going to kick their asses as pirates. I'm staying in this form until we're done, and we're not only going to beat Arlong down, we're going to crush him, his ambitions and then steal all his money. I want him and everyone else who sees what we do to know why we're doing it."

"Because he's an utter bastard?" Makino asked.

"Because he enslaved Nami and her island?" Zoro asked.

"Because he dared to use the darling Nami-chan like that!" Sanji exclaimed, a fire in his eyes at the very idea.

"No, we're going to do this for a much simpler reason, though it does tie into all of that. He took away her dreams," Luffy said simply, picking up the ball Fullbody's ship had shot at the Bastard. "He took away her dreams, made them into a nightmare, and he made my navigator, my **friend** cry."

The metal ball began to warp in his grip, his fingers digging into it as the sound of tortured metal rose around them. "I'm going to feed Arlong his own asshole." '**Crack**' went the ball as it shattered in Luffy's grip. "And that's if I'm feeling gentle."

End Chapter

Two points I know people will ask: Yes, I could have found a way to show Sanji the curse here, but I decided to wait until the most... opportune moment. Then too, the area where it might have been accidentally revealed was during the fight with Mihawk, and I felt doing so would have taken away from the fight.

And two, could Luffy have beaten Mihawk? **NO**. The only way Luffy could have beaten Mihawk at this point is if he had been in his right mind, and used a point blank, skin touching skin Kijin Raishu Dan. Anything else would have given Mihawk enough time to dodge or try to block. If they had fought to the end, Luffy would have lost. He would have made Mihawk pay for it with a few more broken bones, but he would have lost in the end. In my opinion, Mihawk is easily head and shoulders above the rest of the Shichibukai bar Blackbeard, and could be considered almost as dangerous as a Yonko in personal combat. And Luffy at the moment is in no way ready for that kind of combat. He could surprise them with his Ranma-verse techniques and the Haoshoku like he did here, but beat them, no. Anyway, hope you all enjoyed this!