

No rubber in my soul and while I like the aquatransexual I would have given Ranma some actual romantic ability.

This story has been edited by Michael and Hiryo, so there shouldn't be very many mistakes.

Chapter 10 Now That's How You Make an Entrance!

Following after Chopper, Luffy walked past another doorway but paused when he heard his name being called from the other side of the half-open door. Entering the room, he found it was a dormitory which was now full of injured and asleep militiamen. He also saw Sanji, Mr. 3, Makino and Dalton.

Sanji was lying in one of the beds, staring at the ceiling as he thought about something, the smoke from his cigarette a steady stream heading up to the ceiling. In one of the other beds lay Mr. 3, still unconscious thanks to his injuries from Zoro. The swordsman himself was sleeping against the wall when his captain came in, but stood up and moved toward him when Dalton called out for Luffy.

Despite the wounds he had taken Dalton was standing, if on rather wobbly legs, as Luffy entered the room. He was looking markedly better than he had after the battle against Wapol and his followers. He was still swathed in bandages, of course, but the fact that Dalton was moving at all said something about the large man's constitution.

"You sure you should be moving?" Luffy asked anyway.

Dalton waved that off, chuckling quietly as he kept his voice low having no wish to wake up his fellows. "This isn't the first time I've been this badly injured. I heal quite quickly, which I think is part of being a Zoan type. But I wanted to ask you something. You told us your name was Monkey D. Luffy?"

Luffy nodded, one hand moving to push up the front of his straw hat. "Yep that's me, why? Have you seen my wanted poster since we arrived or something?"

"Nothing like that, no it just took me some time before I remembered where I had heard the name before. There was someone looking for you about...I want to say two weeks or so ago," Dalton said as Zoro joined them. "A tall man with freckles, an easy smile, and the same kind of black hair you have. He wore an orange hat as well, and he had the mark of the Whitebeard pirates on his back in the form of a large tattoo. He was also most definitely a character. He fell asleep during a meal so deeply we thought he had died!"

Nearby Makino heard that and perked up noticeably, hobbling over to lean on Luffy, who put an arm around her shoulders, a grin blossoming on his face as Dalton went on. "He

asked us to tell you that he's going to be in Alabasta for a time, and he'd like to meet up with you, though how he knew you would come here I don't know."

"He's probably been telling people on every island he visits and not just this one," Luffy said, his grin widening to the point of near-impossibility. "So, Ace is in Alabasta? I bet he's keeping a low profile, or I doubt that Crocodile'd be in any great rush to start his whole war of conquest thing. Ace hates WG dogs just as much as I do."

Makino cut in, her voice a drone almost as if this was an old argument. "With the exception of Jinbei."

"With the exception of Jinbei," Luffy replied with a roll of his eyes.

Zoro exchanged a glance with Luffy, then spoke bluntly "You know this guy, Ace, you said his name was?"

"Yep, he's my brother."

"You mentioned you had a brother before this, but you hadn't mentioned his name," Zoro murmured, shaking his head. "Why is that?"

"I want to make my own way in the world. I don't want to hang on the coattails of my brothers," Luffy replied simply.

"Coattails of your brothers... A man named Ace, who had the mark of the Whitebeard pirates..." Zoro slowly trailed off, and his face developed a look of shock that was almost comical. "You mean to say your brother is Fire Fist Ace!" After a moment he quickly got control of himself, laughing under his breath. "Damn, what a crew I've joined! Wait, does the cook know about this?"

Luffy thought for a moment then shook his head. "I don't think so, unless Makino or Nami told him."

"Excellent, if it ever comes up, let me get a camera first. I want a picture of that moment. His face should be hilarious!"

Luffy shrugged. "Sure, I guess. But for now, let's go grab our new crewmate and set sail. Since Nami said our Log Pose has already reset, I'd like to be out of here before it gets dark."

Before Zoro could question him on the new crewmate thing Luffy turned, tossing a musket ball from his ki pocket at Sanji who caught it without looking before staring over at Luffy. Seeing his captain gesture towards the door, the cook quickly joined them despite still looking a little singed around the edges from the fight against Wapol and his ministers.

"Where is that duplicitous woman?" Zoro asked looking around.

"If you mean Robin, she went with that young girl who was Mr. 3's partner before we came up here. She wanted to talk to the girl for a bit," Luffy said with a shrug.

"We will take care of her and that one, don't worry. I will look after the girl myself," Dalton interjected. "Though where those two came from or why they attacked I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. And it's good to know she'll be looked after. I got the impression that the girl was just sort of led into crime by bad company," Zoro said, scratching at his face, looking almost embarrassed as he remembered the threat Robin had issued when Zoro appeared on the scene. "Robin seemed a little protective of her."

"Meh, they were sort of coworkers so I'd say it makes sense and she sure as hell didn't seem dangerous to me," Luffy said with a shrug, not realizing how dangerous Miss Goldenweek could be with her Colors Traps if given the time to use them. If he had he might have tried to recruit her.

"Makino, could you take Zoro and head down now to pick up Robin and see what you can add to our supplies from the locals? I figure they like us now so we might as well get what we can." Makino nodded, and Luffy went on. "Sanji, you and I will pick up our new crewmate and gather up the girls."

Sanji cocked an eyebrow at that but already having an idea of who Luffy meant, nodded. Or it could have been the idea of going to meet with Vivi and Nami. Whatever the reason he followed Luffy out into the castle's corridors without further ado.

By the time that Luffy and Sanji caught up with Chopper, he was already talking with, or rather being shouted at by Doctor Kureha. "You think you can just go!? You're no doctor yet. You've got years to go before you have enough knowledge to call yourself a doctor!"

"But, but they really seem to want me, and, and if I don't leave the island, how can I achieve my dream to find all of the cures in the world! I can't do that just sitting here!" Chopper said, even as he hid behind one of the chairs in the room. At least, that was what Chopper thought he was doing. But he had gotten it wrong, only hiding a bit of his body while the rest stuck out from behind the chair.

"Why, you...!" Kureha shouted, followed by the sounds of splintered wood and small hoofs running on stone.

Luffy rolled his eyes, gesturing at the door which separated them from the argument. "Sanji, would you like to do the honors?"

A kick from the cook shattered the door, hurling it off its hinges and as the door fell Luffy stepped forward. Before either of the inhabitants of the room could move the straw-hat wearing pirate tossed a heavy sack which he had pulled out of his ki space towards the woman.

She caught it deftly, hefting it in one hand thoughtfully while Luffy spoke. "That's the gold for looking after Vivi. I also added a bit for looking after Sanji and the rest of my crew's injuries after that fight. But what's this I hear about you trying to convince my new crewmate to stay here?"

"Baka!" shouted Chopper, dancing in place. "It doesn't make me happy to hear you already calling me that!"

Seeing the little creature dance Sanji grinned around his cigarette. Luffy however didn't turn away from his stare-down with the old woman.

But Kureha just scoffed, glaring right back at him unafraid. "This little boy doesn't have enough knowledge to be a real ship's doctor yet! Come back in a few years and then he'll be ready."

"I think his skill is more than enough right now, and I've already offered him the job," Luffy said stepping forward, his arms crossed as he glared at Kureha, a small, challenging smirk on his face.

To one side Chopper was looking between them and decided to speak up once more. "I want to go with them!" he shouted again. "They are real pirates, and, and they accept me, they don't see me as a monster, they want to take me with them on adventures!"

"It **is** quite wise of our Captain to stock up on emergency food, I'd hate to see that effort go to waste." Sanji said, smoking his cigarette and flicking the ash away.

"EEE!" Chopper screamed, but the scream became a roar as he transformed into his near-human form. Rounding on Sanji quickly he reaching out to grab him in his large hands. "I am not food!"

"GAHHH!" Sanji shouted, leaping away. But he wasn't quite fast enough, and the two of them tumbled to the floor.

Luffy rolled his eyes but didn't turn away from Kureha, cocking his head to one side. "Isn't it every young boy's dream to run off to sea anyway? I don't see how you can think to stop him, granny!"

"GAH, you damn brat! If you want to take Chopper, you'll have to take him by force!" Kureha shouted. Though whether it was Luffy's continued use of that insult or the idea of

Chopper leaving which enraged her more no one could say. Charging forward, Kureha pulled out an axe and several knives from somewhere.

Seeing this Luffy blinked, wondering where she had learned the hidden weapons space technique, but he had to set that mystery aside in order to dodge Kureha's knives as she hurled them at him. "If that's the way it's got to be!" he shouted, leaping forward and under one knife, kicking out at the woman's axe then spinning into a second kick which she dodged by the skin of her teeth. "Chopper, Sanji! Get out of here, grab Vivi and Nami and head back to the ship! I'll hold her off!"

Chopper took one last look at the furious expression on Doctorine's face, then turned and bolted with Sanji on his heels.

The two of them continued to spar around the room for a while, then Luffy looked out of the window and spotted Chopper leading the crew off on the sled down the rope line that led down into the different villages elsewhere on Drum Island. "He's off now," he said stepping back, sending another infuriating smirk at the old woman. "Really granny, aren't you a little old to go all tsundere on him?"

"Bah, you don't know anything, brat," Kureha muttered, though she too stepped back, letting the heavy battle axe fall to the floor where its edge gouged the stone like it was wood. "If he's going to be a pirate, he needs to leave port like one. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to give him a proper send-off..." She looked at Luffy speculatively. "How strong are you?"

Luffy shrugged his shoulders. "I could probably lift my crew's schooner if I tried. Why?"

"Come with me then. Like I said, I want to give him a right, proper send-off," Kureha replied before heading out the door.

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"As I said already, it wasn't your fault!" Vivi said, grasping at Nami's hands, squeezing them a little harder now hoping to get her words across better the second time around. "I'm **not** a little girl that you have to protect. I spent two years as a Baroque Works agent. I rarely slept and did things that I really don't want to think about any longer in order to retain my cover and do what I had to in order to save my country. I have been in combat before and been wounded many times. My getting poisoned was the fault of the poisoner and my own lack of speed, not your leaving me alone for a moment."

Nami sighed, but nodded her head, tapping the back of Vivi's hands against her forehead for a moment, the movement a faint swishing noise to Vivi's senses. Vivi couldn't see at present, but she trusted this doctor named Chopper when he said that her sight would come back. Or rather, she trusted Luffy's word that everything would be all right. Why she trusted

someone she had only met a bare few weeks ago to that extent was something she didn't want to look at too closely yet, but she did trust him.

"I understand," Nami said thoughtfully. "I mean, I'd hate it if someone treated me like I couldn't look after myself. Not that I'd ever go looking to start a fight or anything, but still. It's just, you're my friend and I don't have all that many of those. I'm always going to worry about you when we're in a fight, you know?"

"That's fine so long as worrying about me doesn't get you hurt," Vivi said rather tartly.

"Understood," Nami said with a chuckle. She shook her head, her hair swooshing against Vivi's hands as Nami held them up so that she could feel that. She shivered a little at the sensation, but stopped as Nami went on thoughtfully. "I guess I'm still getting used to this whole being a real part of a crew thing. Maybe I should start thinking about how to fight as part of a group? Luffy's training makes us a lot stronger on an individual level, but he hasn't been training us to work together."

"Good point," Vivi said, nodding her head before gently pulling away, her hands moving to touch her eyes. "Did the doctor give an estimate of when my eyesight would come back?"

"Not that I..." Nami broke off as shouts and the clang of steel on stone reverberated through the castle from directly above them. "What the heck is going on?" she growled, standing up quickly from her place by the bed.

Before she could reach the door Chopper burst into the room in his monster form, which Nami idly noticed looked different than the version he'd used in the fight against Wapol. Despite his large size he sounded almost panicky as he gabbled, "We've got to go! Doctorine's gone mad, and she doesn't want me to leave with you all, and your captains holding her off, but I don't know for how long! She's really, really tough! Especially since he keeps calling her granny or old woman! **Why does he keep doing that!?!"**

Sanji appeared from behind Chopper's bulk, then twirled around him, going down to one knee next to the bed and taking Vivi's hands in his. "Oh gracious, most beautiful princess, your knight is here to see you conveyed back to our humble ship! I am so sorry that I wasn't there to defend you against the foul varlet who poisoned you. If I had but known what he looked like I would have most definitely shown him that that was no way to treat a lady!"

Vivi giggled, shaking her head at the cook's attitude, as Nami answered Chopper's question, patting the large creature on the shoulder companionably. "As you spend time with our crew you'll learn that our captain is precisely the sort of person who would go up to a sleeping bear and poke it in the eyeball just to see if he could get away with it."

"The problem," Nami went on with a roll of her eyes while Sanji nodded fervently in agreement, "is that he's good enough to actually survive the experience. I don't think he'll stop doing that until he runs into something that can really hurt him."

"Not even then," Makino said with a laugh, entering with Zoro and Robin in time to hear Nami's words. "He did the same thing to his grandfather and laughed as the older man tried to take it out of his hide, and Garp certainly was strong enough to beat him."

"He did mention that the dream of becoming the Pirate King isn't for the sane," Robin muttered, shaking her head while above them the sound of battle continued, interspersed with numerous taunts from both combatants. "But for now I think we need to get out of here."

Vivi shrugged her shoulders, not quite understanding what was going on, but Makino promised to explain later, so Vivi did not protest as Sanji gently lifted her out of the bed, cradling her to his chest as he moved towards the door. She flushed a little at being in this position, not exactly used to being carried around like this despite some hazy memories of Luffy carrying her in a similar manner. Though strangely she did trust Sanji not to let his hands wander where they shouldn't. "Chopper," she said hesitantly, "your voice sounds deeper. Do you have a cold?"

"Oh!" Chopper said with a laugh, and suddenly Vivi could easily picture a young boy standing there, whatever his medical knowledge. "I'm not sick, I'm just in my transformation form."

"A devil fruit!" Vivi asked in astonishment. "Really? That's fascinating!"

Moments later they were all piling into a sled of some kind according to Nami, and Chopper for some reason was hooking himself up to the front of it. "Isn't that a little cruel?" Vivi asked coldly. "Surely we can all get down on foot."

Nami chuckled wanly. "We're actually at the top of a gigantic freaking mountain. I believe it's four and a half miles high and composed of sheer rock faces. This is the only way down, and I think Chopper's used to it, right?"

"Yep!" Chopper said with a thumbs up towards Nami before he transformed again into his regular reindeer form. "Don't worry," he went on, his voice now coming out slightly distorted due to the changes to his jaw. "I do this all the time for the doctor. After all, I'm a reindeer!"

"Wait, what?" Vivi asked, then the sled began moving and she whooped as she felt her body suddenly flying a little in the air as the sled slid down the rope.

A few moments later she heard the sound of the sea and Carue quacking loudly nearby. She raised a hand in the direction of the noise and felt his head move under her hand gently while Chopper told the duck what was wrong with her.

He then paused to listen to Carue's quacking before smiling. "He says not to worry. He'll be your eyes as long as you need him to be. "

"Wait, you can understand him?" Nami asked, looking at Chopper in astonishment.

"Yep," Chopper said with a nod. "I haven't met an animal I can't understand yet, though how that works I don't know."

"That's awesome!" said Vivi and Nami as one, before looking at one another and giggling as Chopper danced at the praise.

Robin rolled her eyes moving past the two younger women, turning her gaze skyward as Luffy hopped into view descending rapidly to land on the ship's main deck. Just as he touched down there was the sounds of cannons in the distance, and the sky above the drums of Drum Island turned pink. "What, may I ask is that Straw-Hat-san?"

Rolling his eyes at Robin's chosen form of address Luffy looked around at the astonished, smiling faces of his crew sans Zoro. The swordsman had just pushed Banchi up over the side of the ship, which crunched under the turtle's weight as it scrambled for purchase until Luffy moved over to help pull the turtle aboard.

"Kureha wanted to give Chopper a last minute present," he said over his shoulder, while nearby Chopper began to cry softly, waving his hands in the air towards the mountain.

Turning away from Banchi and the view, Luffy began to bark out orders. "Nami, you have the wheel. Sanji, you're on the sails. Zoro head below, and make sure our supplies are stowed. Robin, if you could take the lookout position, I'll be forward with the sounding rope. Makino, Chopper, if you could get Vivi to set up next to the mainmast, that'd be great. Let's set sail!"

"Aye-aye!" his crew shouted eagerly save for Robin and Chopper, who was still crying. Robin was just not the shouty sort.

The crew began to move about quickly, just as eager to get on their way as Luffy was. Winter islands were fun to visit, but you didn't really want to stay there for any amount of time if you could help it, and most of their winter gear had been shredded in the fight.

A few moments later they left Drum Island behind them and Sanji looked up as Luffy called his name. Luffy whispered into his ears for bit and the chef smirked then nodded. Turning, he moved into the schooner's interior to the galley.

A few moments later, the rest of the crew looked up from what they were doing all around the deck, even Banchi as they smelled food. Sanji kicked the door from the kitchen open, and came out holding several heavily laden trays, setting them down on the bench that surrounded the mainmast where Vivi was already sitting. A moment later he came back out with more along with several steins of beer.

"What's all this for?" Nami asked in surprise, taking in the small feast.

"I think the fact that we have a new crewman calls for a celebration!" Luffy said, hopping down from where he had taken the tiller. "Heck, we could even say that we've added three since our entering the Grand line: diplomatic officer, intelligence officer, and now doctor," he said with a laugh, ruffling Vivi's hair as he winked at Robin, not noticing Vivi blushing hotly under his hand.

Robin chuckled, having seen the blush and wondering if the princess was developing a crush on the gallant pirate captain. *That would be a plot right out of a romance novel.* "I will say it again, I am only here for a short time. While I applaud the idea of a pirate crew having an intelligence officer, I'm not going to be able to fill the position for you in the long term."

"What does that matter?" Luffy said with another laugh, though his eyes were shrewd as he looked at her. "You fought your former compatriots back there. I'd say that makes you part of the crew for at least the short-term."

"I can't argue with that..." Robin said slowly, still rather worried about that, though at the time there had seemed to be little choice if she wanted to keep her options open. Luckily no one had actually seen her fighting her fellow BW agents, so her options did remain open. But there was no reason to alienate her captain by once again pointing that out.

It wouldn't occur to Robin until several months later that she had already referred to Luffy as **her** captain at that point...

At present Robin took the cup Luffy held out to her, raising it to her lips and sipping from it. she remained silent, watching the merriment around her as the crew celebrated.

Eventually Luffy turned to Chopper, pushing him forward to stand up on the seat that encircled the mainmast. "So, introduction time, Chopper. Tell the crew a bit about yourself!"

Put on the spot like that Chopper froze, until Nami patted him on the head and he saw the smiling faces all around them. Then he gathered his courage, and stepped forward boldly. "I'm Tony Tony Chopper! I am a reindeer who ate the Human-Human fruit, and I have been training to be a doctor for eight or nine years now! If you have any trouble with wounds or injuries, come to me!"

He suddenly whirled, pointing a finger at Zoro. "Especially you! I can tell by the way you're moving that you did something to your tendons and ligaments recently, and I have no doubt you're going to feel it in the morning. I'll have some medicine prepared for you, but until then no further exercise."

The crew cheered, except for Zoro, who grumbled a little at being ordered about like that, and Nami shouted, "Three cheers for our new doctor!"

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"HAHAHAHAH! We've done it! We've finally escaped from the Calm Belt!" Buggy the clown shouted, before nearly sobbing, covering his face with his forearm. "So many monsters, so many times we were nearly eaten!"

He turned, shouting out at his crew, his face now a mask of fear-induced rage. "If anyone flashily mentions eating fish ever again, it better be flashily burned to a flashy crisp, or else I'm going to feed them to the next monster we see! I'd rather eat seaweed than more fish at this point! Or maybe commit to cannibalism. Now flashily break out the Log Pose!"

As the crew leaped to obey he laughed again, though he seemed to be calming down from his emotional roller coaster now. "We're in the Grand Line now boys! Hopefully we're near enough to the Red Line for our Pose to catch. If not, were going to be sailing flashily for a time until we enter an island's weather zone!"

Half the crew, the half that had been with Buggy before they ran into the bounty hunters who had captured them, laughed at their captain's words before leaping to obey him. The other half looked a little more worried, and Usopp shuddered a little before muttering under his breath, "Thank God I am so skinny. I'd make terrible eating."

Next to him, Alvida nodded. "And I'm too pretty to eat. At least we don't have to worry about that, hmm?" The two of them looked at one another then sighed as Buggy continued to shout orders to the crew. For something that felt like the tenth or eleventh time since meeting one another the two of them had the same thought, which was: 'What have we gotten ourselves into here?'

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The next morning Chopper woke up in his new bed to the sound of crashing overhead. Though calling it a bed was kind of a misnomer, considering it was simply three thin mattresses piled up on one another, much like everyone else's beds. "What was that!?" the small doctor shouted, racing out into the small hallway then towards the stairs up to the day cabin.

There he found Vivi and a few of the others sitting around eating something. Looking around, he noticed quickly that the first mate and the captain were both missing. Nami was also

banging her head on the table in front of her growling. "God dammit! I keep telling those idiots to wait until one of us is out there to take the tiller!"

She got up quickly, her hands balled into fists as she stalked out the door, with Chopper quickly leaping out of the way, staring after her. *Nami can be scary!*

"Hello, Chopper," Makino said, her soft voice putting Chopper at ease after having seen Nami's scary face. The woman sort of reminded him of Doctorine somehow, though she sounded a lot nicer most of the time than Doctorine ever had. "How are you doing this morning?"

"I'm fine," Chopper said, moving over to where Vivi was sitting up in her makeshift bed to one side of the room, with Robin sipping tea and reading a book next to her. There were also two arms jutting out from Vivi's chest currently feeding her, a sight that would have sent Chopper screaming before yesterday. But he had seen Robin's power in action, mostly helping with the wounded, and then twice during the celebration the crew had thrown last night.

A wide grin came to Chopper's face as he remembered the party and the fact it had been thrown in his honor! "How are you feeling, Vivi?" he asked happily, hopping up onto the bed while pulling out a medical device of some kind from the pink bag he carried on his back.

"I'm feeling fine. I'm even getting some flashes of light from my eyes. It seems as if my eyesight will be back later today as you said it would be," Vivi said admiringly. "How long after that should I wait until I'm able to move around and exercise?"

"It depends on what you mean by exercise. Your body will be fine for any kind of exercise in terms of endurance and strength, but you should wear sunglasses to protect from direct sunlight until tomorrow," Chopper said clinically, opening one of Vivi's eyes and looking at it thoughtfully for a moment through the device, before looking down at the original wound from the poison dart, touching it lightly with a paw. "And you shouldn't take any hits or anything like that. You'll bruise far too easily around the site where the dart hit you for a few more days."

"That cuts down on what kind of training I can do, I suppose," Vivi scowled. "But I can still exercise my legs and arms? With Alabasta our next stop I want to get in as much training under Luffy-san as possible."

"That should be fine," Chopper said, then blinked. "Wait, is Zoro exercising with the captain?"

"Yes, they start every day like this if they can," Robin said, then paused as the sound of a heavy blow reverberated through the roof of the day cabin.

This was followed shortly by a feminine bellow from outside so loud it made Chopper flinch where he stood in the day cabin. "If you idiots can't wait until someone's out here to relieve you, then you shouldn't be on duty in the first place!"

"Ahh, Nami-swan!" Sanji swooned. "So vibrant, so alive!"

"I believe you misspoke the word 'violent' there," Robin said dryly, chuckling at the cook's antics.

Makino agreed with her, laughing. Then she and Robin both blinked in surprise as Chopper hopped down from Vivi's bed and raced out the door. "What!? Zoro shouldn't even be moving around all that much today!"

Moments later, still rubbing at the lump Nami had given him, Luffy looked down at Chopper who was fussing over Zoro having just leg swept the swordsman to the ground. "Is it really that serious? I was going to try moving like that with Tekkai activated this evening. Being able to call on Busoshoku I don't have to worry about moving around like that and my normal durability is pretty damn high. But you can use Tekkai even when you're exhausted, which you can't do with Busoshoku."

"**NO!** Whatever Zoro did it pulled his tendons and even his joints something fierce. I'm surprised he's able to even move his arms and legs at all. You shouldn't even be thinking about it!" Chopper shouted, turning angrily and pointing a tiny finger towards Luffy. Then he whirled, transforming within a second and pushing Zoro back down onto the seat around the mainmast. "And if you try to move again before I'm done, I swear I will sit on you."

Zoro growled but obeyed, and Chopper finished his examination, frowning clinically. "Hmmm, he's healing a lot faster than he should be. I've never seen a human be able to heal so quickly... If he continues to at this rate, he should be fine to exercise tomorrow, that's honestly amazing."

"You'll have to get used to that," Luffy said with a laugh. "On this crew none of us are normal. Still, if Zoro can't train, he can take position up in the crow's nest for the day."

Realizing that was a sort of order Zoro nodded gruffly, irritated at the idea that he wouldn't be able to exercise further today but grateful that he'd be able to do something useful anyway. Before Chopper could stop him, he had quickly pulled himself to his feet and climbed up the ropes into the sails and from there up to the crow's nest.

Chopper staring after him angrily, but was brought back to earth as Luffy turned to him. "But I suppose that means I can devote today to training you."

"Training?" Chopper asked then nodded remembering something that Luffy had said during the party last night. "I suppose so, though I'd like to devote my evenings at least to

continuing my reading. I stole several of Doctorine's books on my way out, and I want to read through them before we get to Alabasta so I can send them back to her." The crew had filled Chopper in on their current mission/job, and he was eager to help Vivi, who seemed really nice as well as being part of his new crew, however temporary it might turn out to be.

"That's called borrowing, not stealing," Luffy said, with a true pirate's grasp of ethics as Nami nodded agreement from her position at the tiller. "If you weren't trying to send them back that would be stealing."

Chopper nodded at that, and Luffy went on. "Let's spar for today. That'll give me a handle on where you are now, and I'll be able to figure out a training regimen for you while also pointing out the holes in your current style."

Chopper nodded once more then transformed into his monster form, standing with his hands clenched in front of himself.

"Ugh, okay first we're definitely going to start by teaching you some actual styles," Luffy said, groaning at how amateurish Chopper's stance was before charging forward, his hands flickering. Here, there, and everywhere, the attacks were nearly but not quite invisible to Chopper's senses, though from where she had taken over the tiller Nami could follow Luffy's movements, something which made her smile when she realized it.

Luffy pushed Chopper until the sun was high in the sky sparring with him continuously with only brief water breaks. At last Chopper's endurance gave out and he transformed back to his base form, gasping and shuddering in exhaustion. He noticed, however, that his new captain wasn't even sweating. Indeed, he looked as if he had just been out for a nice slow walk.

Adding to Chopper's dismay, Sanji had come out at some point. He had then begun to talk with Luffy even while Luffy continued to spar with Chopper. That would have irritated Chopper immensely if he wasn't getting his rear kicked so easily.

"I think we're done for the day, Chopper," Luffy said finally, stepping back. "I definitely have a handle on what I want you to work on and the styles I'm going to teach you. Sanji here is going to help you with some of it," he said, gesturing over to the cook. "But I think some leg and strength exercises with Zoro will also be in the cards for you. You're definitely a power fighter, with that kind of body you just won't be able to really use any kind of agility or speed-based style without a lot of work. On that topic, those other forms you used yesterday: that whole fluffy body thing and the speed body. Why didn't you use that against me?"

Between gasps Chopper answered, reaching up gratefully for a drink the cook handed to him. "That's, hah, my, hah, rumble ball! I, hah, created it when I was looking into steroids and how they could affect Zoan types like me. It allows me to achieve three different transformations for six minutes. But I can only use it once every six hours."

"Interesting," Luffy mused. "How much of that is training your body and how much of it is the actual steroids or vitamins and what have you? I don't like the idea of steroids, but if we can train your body to do that without the Rumble Ball..."

"I, I don't know. I think it's the just medicine," Chopper said, shaking his head before he laughed, his eyes, though tired, lighting up eagerly. "Then again, I've never even heard of haki before, let alone those Rokushiki techniques, so who knows?"

"What happens if you take it twice in six hours?" Sanji asked, cocking his one visible eyebrow.

Chopper idly wondered what the heck was up with the cook's eyebrows, and what he was hiding behind the hair covering his eye. He shook his head to clear it of such thoughts before answering. "Well, if I take a second Rumble ball within six hours I lose control of my transformations. They become random whenever I try to change from one point to another."

As he went on Chopper looked away, ashamed. "And according to Doctorine if I take it a third time I apparently transform into an uncontrollable monster which attacks everyone nearby. I don't remember what happens during that state, but that's what she said. It also really hurts my body: that state put so much of a strain on me I wasn't able to move for days after."

Above Chopper, Luffy and Sanji exchanged a glance at that then nodded as one. "We will have to look into that at some point, maybe when we stop at an uninhabited island or something. An ace in the hole isn't a real ace unless you can control it," Luffy said sternly, before smiling and reaching down to pat the little fellow on the top of his large purple top hat. "Still, it's definitely interesting."

"O, okay," Chopper replied with a smile.

"Is it my turn now?" Sanji asked, looking at his captain.

"I get the impression you want to train something specific?" Luffy asked, helping Chopper to his feet and over to the bench, while behind him Makino, Robin, and Vivi came out of the day cabin. Robin and Vivi were dressed in bathing suits, and with robin leading the princess moved to the stern deck, laying out on a few of the lounge chairs there. Makino took the tiller from Nami, who raced inside for her own bikini.

After recovering from his flirtatious state Sanji turned back to his captain, nodding as if nothing had happened while his one visible eye turned back to normal from the heart shape it had assumed. "It took me way too long to close with those idiots the other day. None of them, even the king, would've been a real threat if I could've gotten and stayed in close. So I think I need practice in dodging and closing."

"That's a little hard to train on board the ship," Luffy said thoughtfully, "but we can work on it a bit I think. But isn't it time for lunch?"

By the time Sanji finished cooking and brought out the food, Luffy had prepared for Sanji. After they all ate, Chopper joined the rest of the crew minus Sanji and Vivi in clustering around the aft deck, with Makino having taken the tiller. Even Zoro had come down from the crow's nest, and dozens of hands had shown up all around them clutching what looked like handfuls of musket balls.

"I am going to enjoy this." Zoro muttered, tossing a few musket balls in the air and catching them.

"Shitty marimo..." Sanji growled, but muttered to himself, "This is for training, training. Get back at the stupid national treasure later..."

"This is crazy," Chopper said almost conversationally. After his own training he'd somewhat come to understand that Luffy's training and the word crazy went together, but he still felt the need to point it out in this case. "You know that, right?"

"It's only crazy if it doesn't work," Zoro said firmly with Luffy nodding in agreement.

"No, it's still crazy!" said all four of the girls as one, even Robin agreeing with that point. Not that she made her hands disappear as she did though. After the other girls got over their giggles at their moment of synchronicity, Robin asked, "Shall we begin?"

Hours later when Sanji was carted off gasping and bruised from head to toe by Chopper, Nami poked Luffy in the shoulder. "Can we get my trees up out of the hold? They're starting to wilt down there because of not having enough direct sunlight."

"We've got the supplies so sure. Have you decided where you want them to go?" Luffy asked.

Nami nodded, gesturing all around the aft deck by the railing. "Can you set up some kind of planter there?"

Luffy looked at the banisters, then calculated the amount of wood it would take to transform that railing into a thin wall, and what else he'd need to do and nodded. "I can set up a simple long planter there. We'll have to set up the outer wall first."

The two of them worked on that for a time, hammering boards into place along the banisters so that instead of a railing it was now a thin wall. Then Luffy put in two much shorter walls at a ninety degree angle from the edge of the former railing. Once that was done, they put in another shorter wall on the inside of the planter. This now made a U-shape all around the aft deck, deep enough for one tree all along its length.

As the work neared completion Nami winced, watching Luffy use his palm to hammer in nails once more. "That makes me cringe every time you do it!"

"Everything can be training, Nami," Luffy said with a laugh, standing up and surveying their work with a smile. "That's one point me and Ji-Kure agree on."

"Speaking of training, I've decided I need some new weapons. Those tonfas that you made are okay, but I think I've spent too much time training with a staff to really trade weapons, and I like the extended range a staff can give me."

"I could make you a collapsible staff again, sure," Luffy said thoughtfully. "Though we should be on the lookout for some way to make your staff more versatile. Once you start to learn Busoshoku and can add that to the staff, you'll increase your hitting power immeasurably, so versatility will be the thing."

"And how far into the future is that exactly?" Nami asked sharply.

"For you..." Luffy sighed, "that's going to take a long time for you, sorry Nami. Your original style just doesn't lend itself to Busoshoku, or even any of the techniques that can lead up to it. In fact, that's true for most of the crew. The only one of you I see getting a handle on that in the next few months is Zoro, and I doubt he's going to be able to imbue his swords with it for an even longer time. That aspect is a lot harder than actually learning Busoshoku in the first place, or at least it was for me. Maybe it'll be different for a dedicated swordsman."

Nami nodded. "So, in the meantime..."

"In the meantime I'll make you a few collapsible staffs so you can have extras if they break. But we should definitely keep on making sure that you can dodge as well as you can. Both you and Vivi, and even Robin in a way can benefit from that. I'd love to see you all start showing signs of Observation haki, though I want to get Robin started on learning Busoshoku quickly."

Frowning, Nami opened the door into the room where they had kept the barrels of soil and her tangerine trees stuck in their little planters. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" she whispered, looking around for a moment to make sure they weren't being overheard. "Robin's always saying how she's not going to hang around, and she's not really even part of the crew, despite what you said yesterday. I didn't want to spoil the party last night, but I don't really trust her even after she's fought for us."

"I can understand why you're worried, but I'm not," Luffy replied with a smirk. "Remember what I said when I told you why I wanted her to join us? Her eyes, they tell me a lot about the life Robin's lived."

Leaning down, Luffy lifted three of the trees in his hands, pushing them together hard enough to keep the middle one from slipping out while Nami struggled to lift one before following him out the door. For just a moment Nami let her eyes trail down Luffy's back, staring at his powerful back and his ass appreciatively before looking away, muttering, "That doesn't mean she's trustworthy."

"No it doesn't. But something is telling me that I can trust her, at least as long as she thinks that keeping her options open will help her to achieve her dream. whatever it is."

"And you're so certain she has one? A **dream**, I mean?" Nami asked skeptically, giving the word dream an emphasis that only their fellow crewmen would have truly understood.

"Oh yeah. Robin's got that look in her eye sometimes, that look that tells me she's dedicated to something. And it sure as hell isn't Crocodile, or else she wouldn't be with us at all. Remember she's using Croc as much as he is using her, and Robin wants him weakened. She said so when we first met."

For the next few moments the two of them worked together in silence planting the trees in the planter. Soon they finished, and Nami stretched, cracking her neck and back explosively, thrusting out her chest almost subconsciously. Luffy looked away with a blush on his face and Nami smiled seeing it before looking at her beloved trees.

Here and there were a few dead leaves and one or two branches that would have to be cut off, the trees having suffered without enough direct sunlight since they had entered the Grand Line. "I still have some work here. How long will it take you to have my staff ready for me? I'd like to start training with it and Vivi as quickly as I can."

"I can get that done easy," Luffy said with a nod, reaching out for a tangerine. "Right now, these look tasty..."

Nami slapped his hand away. "Don't touch those! They're not ripe yet, and even if they are these're my trees! Ask first."

Luffy stared at her blankly, then, as Nami to make turn away spanked her on the ass. He jumped away with a laugh as she turned with a growl and a flush on her face. "That's for the poor attitude! I just helped you plant these trees and I want a single tangerine. Is that too much to ask?"

Still flushing, Nami frowned then nodded reluctantly reaching into the tangerine trees for one that was ripe. She then tossed it to Luffy, a sudden smirk appearing on her face. "That's the second time you've spanked my ass. Are you trying to tell me something?"

Luffy shrugged, catching the tangerine out of the air before peeling it with a single finger, popping a slice into his mouth. "Would you rather I tickle you into submission?"

Nami paused at that then shook her head. Luffy had found out early on that she hated being tickled and reacted almost like a madwoman whenever anyone tried. "Okay, I see your point."

Lying out on a lounge chair nearby Robin continued to read her book throughout this activity yet watched the two of them closely over the top of it at the same time. She couldn't tell if Luffy was flirting with Nami there or not, and after a moment's thought she decided that he wasn't. His entire body language wasn't like someone who was trying to flirt or get close physically to Nami. It was more like he was just having fun with her than anything else. *Odd, but interesting.*

Robin felt his eyes stray toward her for a moment, and looked up over her book as Luffy looked away blushing at what she was wearing, which was a quite conservative one-piece bathing suit. Then he looked back at Nami who had turned away and was now bent over, examining one of her tangerine tress before blushing again and moving off quickly. *Hmm, so his type is conservative rather than outgoing? Or does he just prefer my skin tone?* She chuckled a little before Chopper walked up to her, holding one of her fantasy novels, smiling in welcome at the little doctor and putting the captain out of her mind for a moment.

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Near the waters of Alabasta, within sight of the island in fact, two marine ships sat at anchor within bare feet of one another. Nearby several more ships, all galleons like the two anchored so close together, also waited, while several schooners moved around them. From the mainmasts of most of these ship flew the Marine flag, marked with the notation 5/3-1. That told everyone who understood such things that this flotilla, bar one of the ships anchored close together, was under the command of Black Cage Hina, the fifth flotilla of the third fleet stationed in the first half of the Grand Line.

Hina herself was a tall, pink-haired woman with long dancer's legs and a decent-sized chest, both of which her dark purple suit showed just enough of to bring attention to without overdoing it. She also wore sunglasses and bright red lipstick.

A thin cigarette finished the image, though Hina flicked that away as she came to attention, saluting the man and woman waiting for her on the galleon marked with the ensign denoting that it was from East Blue. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, Captain Hina!" Tashigi said warmly, returning the salute before shaking the other woman's hand. "It's good to see you again."

"I'm happy to see you too. Hina pleased," Hina returned, smiling at the younger woman for a moment before turning to Smoker. "Smoker, you haven't changed a bit. The report said that you left your post to chase after this Straw Hat pirate crew. But after the fact that this

pirate could use Busoshoku was brought to light, the higher ups agreed that you acted correctly. So despite flouting command like you normally do, you got away with it once again."

"Bah, as if I care about what those bastards in the high command think," Smoker groused. He shook his head, though his eyes had narrowed noticeably at the news that Luffy could use Busoshoku.

"Hina amused. There you go with that attitude of yours. You never change, do you Smoker." Hina said, then she turned away to stare at the island, her hands clenching and unclenching at her side for a moment. "But if these pirates are going to heap more trouble on the people of this troubled island, I will gladly help you apprehend them. Hina enraged!"

Smoker looked that way too, scowling. "I have to wonder what Straw Hat is doing here too, though I'd guess your anger comes from another source?"

"Hmmf! Obviously. I asked for permission to at least intercede diplomatically between Cobra-sama and the rebels, if not to deploy a force of marines to try to keep the peace, but I have been told time and time again that it is an internal matter, nothing to do with the marines. And then there is the presence of Crocodile... Hina worried."

The two officers exchanged looks at that. Though they went about their duties very differently and had different ways of dealing with their higher ups, Hina and Smoker were united in their distaste for the Shichibukai. Smoker hated the system, however, while Hina hated most of the pirates who were offered the position. Crocodile was one of the ones she was most concerned by, though she also had a personal loathing of Don Flamingo.

"Well, regardless, I think we need to plan this out a bit. You know these waters and this island better than we do Hina. Where do you think we should set up?" Smoker asked.

"I have a few ideas there, but first, whatever happened to that overlarge jutte of yours?" Hina asked quizzically, unused to seeing her old friend without his weapon. He had that weapon even longer than he'd had his Devil Fruit powers.

She watched as Tashigi quickly looked away, and Smoker seemed to turn into smoke without actually activating his power, drawing so hard on his cigars his face disappeared behind the smoke from it's end. "Was it something Hina said?"

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Over the next few days, the crew fell into a new routine dominated by everyone's daily training routines. In the morning, Luffy and Sanji would wake up before dawn to relieve whoever was on guard duty that night which was usually Robin and/or Chopper. Sanji's current routine was a lot less noisy then Luffy and Zoro's constant sparring, and Luffy could hurl things at Sanji and watch the tiller at the same time.

After Chopper had been shown how to use the tiller, he and Luffy had set up a stand right next to it so that the young reindeer could read while also working the tiller at need. Everyone on board by this point knew how to follow the Log Pose, which gave Nami time to start on her maps in earnest, something she was ecstatic about. On top of this, Chopper didn't need as much sleep as the rest of the crew.

As for Robin, she simply enjoyed staying up to ungodly hours. She liked to be in the crow's nest covered with a blanket, a mug of coffee in her hand as she read from the light of a small lamp.

Chopper and Robin got on surprisingly well, bonding first over fantasy novels of all things, a genre that Chopper was very interested in but hadn't had the opportunity to really get into thanks to Doctorine's grueling teaching program. For her part Robin encouraged this, and seemed to find the young Chopper a fun, or at least interesting, companion.

After they finished training Sanji would prepare breakfast while Luffy and Chopper would train for a bit. Or if he was too tired Luffy would train Nami, Makino, and Vivi, sometimes all at once.

Vivi's eyesight had come back two days out from Drum Island just as Chopper had predicted, though Chopper had her wearing sunglasses for a few days just to be safe. When Chopper saw Vivi trying to practice dodging like Sanji he screamed, transforming into his near-human form and smashed Luffy into the deck. Once that was done Chopper rounded on a startled Vivi and gave her a stern talking to about how easily her body would get bruised if she took a hit near where the poison dart had struck her.

This still let Vivi practice with her peacock slashers and her acrobatics however. To aid this, Luffy used the last remains of the original crew's bunks to set up an obstacle course on the gun deck for her to run through. Both Nami and Makino enjoyed that type of exercise too, making Luffy wonder if he should make that a permanent feature at some point.

After brunch Luffy would train with Zoro and Sanji, then just Zoro for a time until an early dinner, the two of them sparring as hard as they could without using special attacks or utterly destroying the ship. After they finished for the day, Sanji would bring out an early dinner. After that was the quiet time, with all of the crew either talking or otherwise on deck enjoying time together, or just sitting and reading as the case may be.

It was during one of these quiet evenings that the news about Ace looking for Luffy and maybe being in Alabasta came out. Nami simply nodded, while Robin looked somewhat intrigued behind her book wondering who he was, and Chopper and Vivi looked confused.

It was Sanji who gave their confusion voice, asking bluntly, "So who's this Ace guy, Luffy-chan?"

Luffy smiled, leaning up from where he, currently a she, was stretched out on Banchi's back, soaking in the sun. Sanji drooled a bit at the sight, unable yet again to remember that whatever 'she' currently looked like, Luffy was still a guy underneath.

For her part Luffy paused a moment before answering the question, shouting up at the crow's nest. "Oy, Zoro! It's time!"

While the rest of the crew watched in puzzlement, Zoro leaped down from the crow's nest and raced inside to grab a camera that Nami had bought back in Logue Town. Sanji would have questioned this, but at that moment Luffy stretched again, twisting around so that her back could get some sun. This accidentally allowed Sanji a chance to look down her shirt at her somewhat small but incredibly perky chest.

This robbed Sanji of all coherent thought for the two minutes it took Zoro to return. The first mate moved to one side with the camera ready as the rest of the crew watched on, wondering what was going on.

"Hmm, oh Ace, he's my brother," Luffy said, speaking as if the last few minutes hadn't occurred while smirking over at Sanji. "Me, Sabo and Ace lived together for years before and after I met Makino-nee. But then they set off to sea as soon as they hit sixteen, and I had to wait until I turned sixteen to follow them."

"O, Oh," Sanji muttered, looking away as his gentlemanly side finally overrode his hormonal side. "I see."

"Yep, Ace has been in the Grand Line for years. He's also apparently joined up with Whitebeard's crew too. I still wonder how that happened. I mean the last letter he sent he said he had, but he never explained why," Luffy mused.

"Wait... Ace...part of the Yonkou Whitebeard's crew..." Sanji puffed on his cigarette between each word, wondering why that sounded so familiar. Then he gasped, as did Vivi and Robin as they realized who Luffy was talking about.

But Sanji's reaction took the cake. His eyes almost bulged out of his head so much that the one normally hidden behind his hair was actually visible for a moment. His mouth dropped open letting his cigarette fall to the ground, and his hair seemed to suddenly stick out every which way.

Grinning evilly Zoro quickly snapped a picture.

Sanji didn't even notice the flash, too busy staring at Luffy in astonishment, 'her' body for once not registering. "Wait, do you mean Fire Fist Ace! The Great Rookie, commander of Whitebeard's second division?! **He's** your brother!?"

"Yeah, that's my big brother, all right. Though like his joining Whitebeard, I've no idea why he's called Fire Fist. I knew he was known as the Great Rookie, though."

"You are brother to Whitebeard's second division commander Portgas D. Ace and grandson to Monkey D. Garp, the greatest hero of the marines!" Sanji groaned, reaching down to pick up his cigarette with one hand while the other tried to get his hair back in order. "What the **fuck** is wrong with your family!?"

"We're just awesome like that!" Luffy said with a laugh.

"More like flat out crazy!" Sanji spat out before looking over to where Zoro had just given Nami her camera back. The orange-haired girl was now giggling at the picture, and normally the sheer sexiness of that sight would have sent Sanji into his flirtatious mode. But the fact Zoro was chuckling at whatever it was too kept his attention firmly fixed on the first mate. "Oy, shitty marimo, what's so funny huh?"

"Hahaha! I think we have a masterpiece here, Aho-cook," Zoro retorted, showing the rest of the crew and Sanji the picture he had taken. "We might even send it in to the newspaper see if they could use this for your bounty poster instead of that drawing!"

"Why, you shitty moss-head! Give that here, damn it! I can't let the ladies of the world see me in such a state. It would be a travesty!" Sanji shouted, leaping feet first towards Zoro, who dodged to one side.

The two of them quickly fell to fighting, and since Zoro had left his swords up in the crow's nest for a moment he was at a disadvantage. He was even stronger than Sanji though, so could block his kicks and did so a few times before Sanji went for a roundhouse kick, actually flipping himself onto his hands for a moment to bring both legs around in a whirlwind. Zoro deflected the first kick, then ducked, leaping forward and grabbing Sanji around the waist, slamming him backwards and down onto the deck.

Watching this curiously, Chopper shook his head. "Why do Zoro and Sanji not get along? I thought crewmates were supposed to all get along like in a herd."

Before anyone else could answer Robin spoke up from where she had once more retreated behind a book. As was normally the case this had not stopped her from watching what was going on and now she delivered a crushing blow with the most deadpan tone any of the crew had ever heard. "Don't worry about it Doctor-san, it is just a mating ritual used between human men. When two men like each other but don't want to admit it, they will sometimes go to extremes to show their dislike for one another. For those men with an overabundance of testosterone, this comes out in the form of constantly looking for reasons to fight one another."

Both boys currently trying to kill one another shuddered and leaped away from one another. "Gah, it's not like that and you know it woman! It's just Curly-brow irritates the hell out of me!" Zoro roared.

"Indeed, Robin-chan!" Sanji said, going to his knee next to Robin's chair. "I am shocked and appalled that such vile lies could pass such lovely lips!" He smirked suddenly, turning back to the swordsman. "Although, given his general disdain for the female form perhaps there is some basis in fact to that comment when directed the shitty marimo's way."

"Che, at least I'd know what to do with a woman, you natural blond! Have you ever even gotten past the kiss on the cheek stage with your over the top attitude!?" Zoro retorted.

"Have **you** ever even held the hands of a girl?" Sanji shot back. "Dressing your sword up in a dress doesn't count!"

As Robin leaned back with a faint smile on her face at the amount of chaos she had started, Luffy leaned down, whispering into her ear. "You are evil sometimes, you know that?"

"Pirate..." Robin drawled, waving a hand at herself with something suspiciously like a giggle escaping her, while Luffy fought to keep her eyes on Robin's face rather than falling to that hand and the attention it brought to Robin's chest.

The two boys shouted and raged at one another for a bit until they began talking about how to prove they were straight and began to eye up the girls. Sanji even looked at Luffy for a moment, but Luffy just held up a fist and asked sweetly, "Do you suddenly have a death wish, Sanji?"

He gulped audibly, and Luffy sighed, deciding to end this bit of amusement. "Anyway I think we need to talk about something more serious for a moment." Luffy waited until she had everyone's attention then smiled. "This ship has served us well, and I think we can all agree it's a great ship, right? So, I think it deserves an actual name."

Vivi blinked, looking around at the rest of the crew sans Chopper and Robin. "Wait, you mean you haven't named this ship!? Do you have any idea how much bad luck that is?"

"While I don't normally believe in luck, I think the princess has a point," Robin said, putting down her book for once and looking around her seriously. "There are numerous substantiated tales of ships without names running into small issues that normally would not have been problems and sinking, or simply disappearing at sea. You need to rectify this."

"I honestly didn't think it was that big a problem considering it was a marine ship before we stole it and they probably had named it," Luffy replied blithely. "But it's true we need to figure out a name for it."

"How about *Swift Sword*?" Zoro asked. "That's a good, strong name."

"No. The swift part's okay, but I think the name needs to just be a single word," Nami said, shaking her head. "I vote for *The Moneymaker*!"

"Gah, no. That makes the ship sound like we're bankers or money-launderers," Makino objected. "*The Dreamer*, maybe?"

"*The Beautiful Maiden*!" Sanji said, dancing around the ladies. "For certain that tells everyone the most important thing aboard!"

"Only in your mind, Aho-cook! How About *Waveblade*!" Zoro supplied.

"Why do I think every name you think of is going to contain something about swords?" Luffy teased. "One track mind there, Zoro. I think our name needs to say something about our actions. Considering that we're going to be preying on other pirates, it needs to somehow allude to that, I think."

"Pot meet kettle, you're both black, and oh my, Luffy, you used a big word!" Nami teased, causing Luffy to pout at her while Nami rolled her eyes. "How about *Tycoon*? It says what we all want to be, right?"

"What **you** want to be, you mean," everyone else save Robin replied, but Vivi actually went on, frowning in thought. "Don't get too set on the one word name concept. There are many ships that have two or even three words in their names. I think that Makino-san was on to something with *Dreamer*. A ship's name needs to either evoke an image or connect to something near and dear to the crew's hearts."

"Huh..." Sanji thought for a moment, then shrugged, trying to put his own idea and Makino's together. "*Dreaming Maiden* then?"

Luffy sighed, leaning back in one of the lounge chairs as the debate continued, muttering under her breath. "I was going to go with something like *Queen Anne's Revenge*, but I doubt anyone would get the reference."

Nearby Robin twitched, almost turning to stare at Luffy for a moment as he said that name. *Where have I heard that before? It was a long time ago, I know that. But...*

The thought didn't remain in her mind, but there was something about that name that made Robin wonder for a moment before she turned to follow the ongoing debate. Eventually they all voted on the name *Resolve*, deciding it was simple, easy, and underlined all of their goals as well as sounding strong. Makino and Chopper immediately got to work painting the name on the side of the ship, as the rest went back to what they had been doing.

On the sixth day out from Drum Island, their routine was interrupted about halfway through the day when a lone seagull was seen in the sky above. From where she was once more sunning herself Nami spotted the incoming bird and raised her hand languidly, waving to it from where she was sunbathing.

"You still have a subscription despite your complaints about it costing so much?" Luffy teased.

Nami huffed, but it was Robin who replied from where she was lying out in the next lounge chair over from Nami. "It's better to be informed of things, whatever the price of the newspaper. If nothing else, it tells you what the World Government wants you to know, and even the best censorship can sometimes allow real information to leak through."

"See?" Nami said smugly, looking over her glasses at Luffy while stretching her hands up over her head as the seagull came in to land, smirking as Luffy looked away. It never ceased to make her feel good when she could get Luffy to react like that.

The seagull landed between her and Robin, and Nami sighed. "How much?"

The seagull held up its wing, indicating three feathers as Chopper, who was sitting on the deck nearby working on creating some pills of some kind, translated.

"That I didn't need a translation for, Chopper. But thanks anyway," Nami said shaking her head with a sigh. "At least the price hasn't gone up again." As she began to flip through the newspaper however Nami paled.

From his position at the tiller Luffy noticed this and asked quickly, "What's wrong?"

"It's got some news from Alabasta..." She shot a look over to where Vivi was sleeping, having fallen asleep after literally collapsing into a lounge chair worn out from exercising with Luffy for several hours. "It's not good. Do you think... Do you think we should hide it from her?"

"No," Luffy said authoritatively, a tone entering his voice that Robin cataloged as the Captain Voice as he turned away, lashing the wheel down before moving over to tap Vivi on the shoulder. "Vivi?"

The blue haired girl woke up with a start but groaned as she saw Luffy hovering over her. "I'm not going back to exercising!" Vivi tried to roll over, but couldn't with Luffy's hand on her shoulder. "Go torture someone else, please!"

She then sat up abruptly, pointing down to the deck. "I know. Figure out some way to train Carue!"

From where he had been sitting and shooting the breeze with Banchi Carue heard this and squawked in indignant betrayal.

Luffy laughed quietly, shaking his head. "That might be an interesting idea if we had a ship large enough to make him run around on it without getting in anyone's way. But that's not why I woke you up. The newspaper has some information about what's going on in Alabasta. I figured you'd want to know, bad or good."

"Oh... yes, thank you, Luffy-san." Vivi nodded, and moved over to sit next to Nami, reading the paper over her shoulder before gasping one hand coming up to her mouth. Half of the Royal Army has gone over to the side of the rebels! But that's, that gives them parity! It almost guarantees that there will be more war!" She looked up at Luffy, her eyes showing anguish. "Can we get this ship to go any faster!?"

"Makino? Nami?" Luffy asked calmly, not looking away from Vivi's distraught eyes. He understood why Vivi was acting this way of course. Now that the two sides were almost even, open conflict between the royalists and the revolutionaries would rise exponentially. More people died in open warfare than guerrilla wars especially when the guerrillas were only after the government rather than the civilian population like in this one.

Makino shook her head quickly. "We tore nearly every spare canvas we received from the town we saved from the Hawkins Pirates heading to Drum Island, and they didn't have any to give us. We even offered to pay for it, but they just didn't have any. If we push things we'll lose sails, and we won't be able to replace them."

"Pirates paying for things," Nami growled, shaking her head, but subsided at Luffy's look. "Yes, I know I need to get better at that, but still..."

"There's a place for greed, and I don't mind you being greedy but we pay for what we need when we can. There's no point in doing otherwise, especially given how much money we already have in the hold," Luffy said before looking over at Vivi. "Sorry, but I'm not about to cripple this ship to save us, what, a day, a few hours? Do you have any idea how many days it takes a ship to get from Drum Island to Alabasta?"

Vivi slowly shook her head. "No, I don't, unfortunately." She sighed, looking away, her face almost crumpling in worry. "We have to stop this!"

"Then I think it's a good time to talk strategy," Luffy said, before turning to shout down to the main deck. "Sanji, Makino! Get out here! We're going to have a war council. Zoro, you too."

Zoro dropped down from above, landing with a thump at the same time Sanji came out from the day cabin, wiping his hands on a cloth he kept at his waist before moving up the small staircase with Makino to join the others. They all crowded around with Luffy leaning back

against the post holding the wheel and Robin, Chopper, and Sanji sharing one lounge chair while Zoro took the other, along with the duck who had followed Chopper up. Surprisingly, even the giant turtle had moved over, sticking his head up over the banister separating the raised stern deck from the main deck.

"Considering that I am still not part of this crew, I do not think I should take part in this," Robin said, moving to get up and leave.

Luffy, however, just rolled his eyes, gesturing her back into her chair. "As if that would stop you from listening in."

"True. Would it help if I gave you my word that I would not?" Robin asked smiling, though there was something almost fake about it to Luffy's eyes.

Luffy looked at her closely, then nodded. "Yes, it would. Would you give it?"

Robin paused, her smile disappearing as she looked at Luffy from behind her sunglasses, then slowly shook her head. "No. As I've said all along, I need to keep my options open. If I can report back to Crocodile with some knowledge of your plans, that might help soothe any feelings he might have about my being incommunicado for so long. I have said time and time again that while my objectives are not Crocodile's, I do require aid to reach my own objective. Using you to distract or otherwise weaken his position is one thing, going against him entirely and no longer having that aid is quite another. Unless you would be willing to offer your support?"

That was the first time Robin had even admitted that she would be open to such a thing, but Luffy knew not to call her on it. Instead he answered calmly with a simple shrug. "I'd be willing to, but I have no idea what aid you could want." With that said, Luffy turned away, looking over at Vivi once more. "So we won't make any direct plans right now. Instead we will talk about the opposition and an overall objective, okay?"

Even as Luffy spoke Robin was still staring at him, a faint smile on her face as she leaned back, watching the captain of the ship in action. *Once again he is showing he has hidden depths.* She tried not to think too closely about the amount of trust Luffy was giving her, or how close he had come there to saying yes to her rhetorical question.

Even if they weren't going to make any specific plans, just knowing Vivi's objectives and what Vivi knew would help Robin if she will went back to Crocodile. And, Robin realized, Luffy knew it too. He just expected her not too.

He trusted her, even after a bare few weeks, even after all of the times she had spent keeping her distance from the crew. *Which I have to admit has not been as easy as I had hoped. Nami is a delight to trade barbs with, Sanji's antics never cease to amuse, Luffy and Makino are both excellent conversationalists, and Chopper is simply fun to be around.* She discounted Zoro

since the swordsman, strangely enough, was more openly suspicious of her than Nami, though plainly willing to follow his captain's recommendations.

Vivi however did not share Luffy's willingness to trust Robin, and looked at her closely for a moment before sighing and deciding to go along with the captain on this. After all, her objectives were rather obvious, and Robin already knew all the people that they were going to face.

She opened her mouth, but Luffy held up a hand. "Information on the numbered agents first, I think, and then what you want to do once we get there."

Vivi nodded, and outlined all she knew about the numbered agents.

After she described the most dangerous one on her list, Mr. 1, Zoro leaned forward, interest plain. "A sword man?" he asked closely.

Vivi nodded. "I'm not certain why the rumors call him that. I've never seen him in person, let alone watched him fight," she cautioned. "He's just known as a sword man. He doesn't use weapons, but all of his victims have been sliced as if by swords."

"A Devil Fruit of some kind possibly," Luffy said, flicking his eyes over to Robin who had leaned back and begun to read a book again, not taking part in the conversation, but also not leaving as she had said she should. He smirked at that, and watched Robin twitch, somehow having spotted his expression before he turned back to the conversation. "If you want to take a step towards cutting steel I suppose that's your opponent then, Zoro."

Zoro nodded eagerly, his hands gripping the hilts of the swords at his side, one after another. "Yes."

Sanji smirked, exchanging a fist bump with Luffy who did the same with Zoro, the three boys united for once in a moment of understanding that the girls had to shake their heads at. "Men," Nami said, putting their thoughts into words. "Anyway, next up would be Mr. 2?"

"Him I actually know quite well," Vivi said with a faint smile. "He's not, that is, he's..." she trailed off, trying hard to describe Mr. 2's personality when he interacted with the other agents. They didn't meet all that often, but Mr. 2 was an exception to that rule, working with the higher numbered agents and even the Millions closely.

Carue however spoke up before she could form her thoughts into words. "/He's nuttier than a fruit bat!/" the duck quacked, causing Chopper to giggle before translating the words.

"That's not very nice, but, um..." Vivi said hesitantly.

"/But it's accurate./" This time it was the turtle who spoke, his head slowly retreating into its shell for a moment before coming out. "/He dresses in this tutu thing, and always dances around the place like a ballet dancer! It's hideous! The most horrible thing I've seen in my 240 years!/"

Robin abruptly put down her book, staring first at her erstwhile steed and then at Chopper who had translated that, and when she spoke it was slow and deliberate. "I apologize for letting you see that Banchi, but, 240 years?"

The turtle nodded its head slowly. "/Yes. I've lived my entire life in the ocean and deserts of Alabasta. Why?/"

"We **will** be talking later, if I could ask for your help in translating Chopper," Robin said, her eyes lighting up with knowledge-lust for a moment.

The turtle nodded agreeably at that, and Luffy coughed into his fist. "That's for later," he said firmly. "Let's get back on topic for now."

"Yes, well, Mr. 2 does dress like that," Vivi said, unwilling to speak too poorly of the man. "He's actually quite personable and always treated the lower-ranked agents, if not kindly, then at least not cruelly. But his personal style is something called Okama-kenpo."

Sanji shuddered a little and looked over at Luffy, already giving him the finger, his teeth clamping hard on his cigarette. "Hell no! No, I will not be the one to fight him!"

"It's either him, or you take out several of the other higher numbered agents," Luffy said with a shrug. "I would've thought that job would've been better suited for Nami and Makino, but if you don't want to..."

Sanji was torn. On the one hand he really didn't want to fight someone like that, but on the other hand his chivalrous nature refused to let the ladies fight him instead. "Fine, but you owe me, Captain."

Nami laughed, cackling a little. "Don't worry about that. We'll take it out of Alabasta's treasury." She winked at Vivi, who giggled at Nami's overacting, knowing that Nami wasn't actually interested in gouging the treasury of its gold. Their library or any books on navigation, that was a different story.

"Hehehe. Anyway, you have already dealt with Mr. 3 and his partner, so next up would be Mr. 4. He and his partner work well together, though they don't actually have much in common. Mrs. Merry Christmas is always talking fast apparently, and Mr. 4 very slowly. I would assume that he's some kind of musclebound sort, but I can't say for certain. Oh, and they have a dog who they use in combat somehow. At least that's what rumors among the Baroque Works agents told me."

Luffy nodded, and Nami wrote that down before looking up. "What about Mr. 1's partner, and Mr. 2's? You didn't mention them."

"/Mr. 2 doesn't have a partner; he's his own partner,/" said both of the animals who had seen the man, quickly translated by Chopper.

Both Nami and Vivi giggled helplessly at Chopper's accents to their voices, his face actually twisting to one side as he tried to imitate the old turtle's tone in order to put enough disgust into his words. After the princess had recovered from her giggle fit, she went on, becoming serious quickly. "That, ahem, that might be true, but beyond his martial arts ability, Mr. 2 has a Devil Fruit power that is rather insidious. He is able to change into the face and form of anyone he touches."

Luffy and the others all hissed, understanding how nasty that could be in combat. "If we ever split up we'll need to work out some kind of code system, or maybe wear pieces of cloth or something of that nature..." Luffy scowled. "And Mr. 1's partner?"

"Though I don't know anything about her powers rumor is that Ms. Double-finger is almost as dangerous as Mr. 1. Her specialty is assassination, so that should tell you something."

"I'll be the one to handle her, then," Makino said calmly, shaking her head with a sigh. "If we need to, anyway."

"As for the others, I don't think they are as much of a threat as those five are. Mr. 7 and his partner Ms. Father's Day are a sniper team, but other than their appearance I don't know anything about their powers or abilities. I don't think that they have Devil Fruit powers, though, just guns. And the other, Mr. 6, has been missing for several months along with his partner."

"Those are the numbered agents. As for the rest of the Millions and Billions, they're much like the bounty hunters that Zoro fought in Whiskey Peak in terms of skill. The Millions typically man the Baroque Work's ships and are the level of regular thugs, while the Billions usually serve as spies or servants to the various numbered agents." Vivi finished.

"So, no threat," Luffy said with a smile.

"Except in large numbers," Vivi cautioned. "They're not called Millions or Billions for no reason, after all. I think there are about eighteen or twenty galleons worth of them at the very least, something like two thousand men or more, all told."

Luffy shrugged, not conceding the point but not saying anything either. "So, what are our goals here?"

"I want to meet with my father and the leader of the rebel army. Logically speaking, I suppose I could send a message to my father and have it believed. While he doesn't know

where I've been, he knows what I've been doing, and Father would trust any written message from me delivered by Carue. Or I could try to set up a meeting with one of the royal guards and have him convey the message," Vivi said.

"Royal guard?"

"Yes," Vivi said, smiling happily. "Igaram wasn't the only member of the royal guard there are two more including the greatest warrior of my nation, Pell." She smiled over at Chopper. "You and the two of them have something in common. They both ate Zoan fruits too. In Chaka's case he ate the Zoan type, Model Jackal. Pell ate the Model Falcon. I remember riding his back through the skies sometimes."

"That must be nice. I love being in the air myself, though turning into a bird would be kind of strange," Luffy said with a smile.

"You have a lot of experience with that particular brand of strange," Sanji said dryly, then flinched as Luffy made to pour a glass of seawater over himself. "No, stop! We're in serious mode right now, right!?" *And he's not wearing a white t-shirt or anything sexy either!*

"Your father believing you, that's fine. But why would the leader of the rebel army listen to you? Aren't you the enemy?" Zoro asked his head cocked to one side as he looked at Vivi.

"The man who leads the rebellion is actually an old friend of mine named Kohza. He was never a proponent of the royal family unlike his father, but he was always a friend to me. Or he was, until evidence was planted that my father had been using a chemical compound called Dance Powder to try to control the weather system over our island." Vivi replied rather bitterly. She hated the fact her best friend had believed that garbage. No matter how damning the evidence had been, Kohza knew her father, he should have trusted the man more than the evidence.

"So this old friend would really believe you after so many years of fighting against your father and your government?" Luffy asked skeptically. "Friendship's well and good, and I'd be the first to say it's one of the most important things in the world, but blood and a cause are just as important."

"I know that!" Vivi shouted suddenly making all of them jump as she glared angrily at Luffy. "I know that, but I know Kohza, and I know most of his officers too. They're all old friends of mine. They'll, Kohza, he'll listen to me."

Nami suddenly smirked, throwing arm around the younger girl's shoulders and holding up two of her fingers crossed together, wagging them suggestively. "So, were you and this mystery guy like that~?"

Robin closed her book with a snap, looking over at Vivi intently as did Makino. "Crocodile of course knows about your connection to Kohza. It's one of the reasons why he was so concerned about your skulking around. But we never figured out if you were actually lovers."

In reply to these pointed questions Vivi blushed a red that had not been seen since the last time Luffy had changed into his female form. "N-no!" she exclaimed, trying to shake Nami's arm off without success. "That is, um, no! We're not like that, and even if I had feelings like that toward Kohza, I'm a princess. I can't marry just anyone. I have to marry someone that would bring political connections or other influence to my nation."

"Harsh, though it ain't like I haven't heard that crud before. Bloody nobles, as if breeding means anything in people. We're not dogs or horses," Luffy said, shaking his head.

For just a moment Robin blushed as a rather dirty thought came to her. *Well, a certain part of you is certainly horse-like!* But then the thought was gone, her blush banished before anyone could notice.

Nearby, Sanji went into a rage for a moment at the idea, having before sunk into a puddle of despair on the deck at the idea that Vivi had a boyfriend. Now he quickly came back into full on love cook mode. Twirling around the lounge chair where Vivi and Nami were sitting, shouting about how he wished he was a prince that could sweep her off her feet.

Rolling his eyes, Luffy coughed, gathering everyone's attention once more. "Okay, I understand why you want to meet with your father and this Kohza guy. They can hopefully call off any open warfare. But that really doesn't matter in the long term, does it?"

"What?" Vivi asked, blinking as everyone else turned to Luffy.

"Crocodile's the problem. So long as he's still out there whatever progress you make can be undone. Even with all your evidence against him, unless you have something concrete enough to maybe make him lose his Shichibukai status then it'll be your word against his. Besides, you said Baroque Works has agents. How do you know they don't have agents among the rebel army or even the royal army? Would your own people, let alone the WG, believe you if you didn't have any real concrete evidence beyond your words?"

"I know that," Vivi retorted. "But if I can just get my father and my friend to the table together then we can act against Crocodile. Both of them have a lot of public support. If they call off the war and agree that Crocodile is the real enemy, the public will believe it."

"Maybe, maybe not. And that's not saying anything about the problem of agents among their followers. Besides, what happens if Crocodile has a plan for that too?" Luffy riposted.

Vivi frowned. "What do you mean?"

"What if he has a plan for the two sides making peace with one another? What happens then? What if he decides to just launch a war of his own? Can your warriors stand up to him?"

"No," Robin said flatly before Vivi could answer. "In Alabasta, there is no one that can defeat Crocodile. This entire crew would be nothing more than targets to him there." She looked over at Luffy. "Even your Busoshoku might not be enough to let you fight him. He is that strong."

Luffy shrugged. "We'll see about that. But he is still the problem. We need to move against Croc, not just try to start up this dialogue between the two other factions. Get rid of Baroque Works and find the solid evidence we need before we do anything else. To my mind, we're the only real wildcard in this game. Even if Crocodile knows about us and something about our skills, he doesn't know everything, and there's no way he's been able to plan for us as well as he's been able to plan for you, your family, or this rebel guy getting along. Besides, were pirates."

At Vivi's quizzical look, Luffy expanded. "Pirates fighting a royal Shichibukai, who would care? That would seem like normal day-to-day business. So we take him out, then start questioning the survivors. Getting this Mr. 2 guy to show his power in front of your rebel friend and then figuring out a way to scare some of their spies out into the open will give us the evidence."

Behind her book, which was once again open, Robin hid a very small smile as she said, "You have a true grasp on tactics and getting to the heart of the matter; an old head on young shoulders I believe is the phrase."

Luffy twitched. It wasn't noticeable to anyone else, but Robin noticed and wondered. *Fascinating!*

"I can't ask you to do that!" Vivi shouted, shaking her head. "He's a Shichibukai! Why would you fight him if you didn't have to? You're just, you're just here to transport me to my country."

"Why the hell wouldn't we?" Luffy asked frowning. "We're friends, aren't we?"

As Vivi blushed at the idea of someone going that far for friendship's sake Zoro stood and began to noogie Luffy's head relentlessly, having first moved his straw hat aside to do so. "Don't act all cool like that. You just want to fight Crocodile anyway."

Luffy growled then turned swiftly, putting Zoro in a headlock. But Zoro replied by getting his arms around Luffy's waist and suplexing him into the deck, shattering the wood of the deck and the mood as the two of them fell to wrestling.

"And the serious moment is over," Nami laughed, squeezing Vivi again around the shoulders. "But don't worry about it. That moron will beat Crocodile, I have no doubt about it."

Robin looked at her, then over at Sanji who was also nodding, and frowned, wondering where their confidence was coming from. *Is it just naïve, blind confidence in their captain, or is there something more solid behind it...*

OOOOOOO

Several days passed after that, with the crew still continuing to train and grow closer over time. Nami and Vivi grew as close as Nami was to her own sister, while Robin and Chopper bonded over books and the joy of silence and reading. Robin surprised herself by opening up a little more to the others thanks to Chopper's presence. It was quite nice to have him around for reasons Robin really did not want to consider too closely.

After dealing with some of the more interesting creatures that populated the waters around Alabasta, the first sight of the kingdom itself came over the horizon. Makino was up in the crow's nest at the time, practicing ranging on things with her pistol in one hand and the spyglass in the other. It had been she who had spotted the land, but Makino did not join the happy cheering going on below, continuing to look ahead of the ship.

Within a few minutes her dedication was rewarded as she could see several small ships of various sizes moving around what had to be a port. "We have ships out there too!"

"Of course there are," Vivi said happily, spinning away from where she had been dancing around with Carue and Sanji to look up at the crow's nest. "Alabasta is a major trade center, after all."

Makino nodded, but kept a sharp eye out, and moments later saw several dozen ships moving away from the other ships she could see in the harbor, and then still more coming out from over the horizon to either side. "What does the Baroque Works ensign look like?"

Vivi frowned, then quickly ascended the mast to join her, standing next to the woman on the mizzen mast for a moment as she stared through the spyglass that Makino had handed her. "Oh no! It's the Millions! They must've been able to somehow figure out..."

"Figure out nothing," Luffy interrupted with a shake of his head. "They probably just set ships up in every port and then sent out pictures of what our ship looks like. Guess our cover of Robin trying to recruit us didn't hold up."

"So what are we going to do?" Zoro asked, one hand falling to rest on his three swords eagerly. "Fight our way through?"

"There are thousands of them!" Vivi shouted, leaping down from one spar to the other to smack Zoro upside the head, only for Nami to get there first. She calmed down then, shaking her head. "No, we should try to find some little cove to put ashore first."

Nami nodded agreement. "Besides, ship to ship fighting isn't like anything else. Sanji might be decent at Geppo, but Zoro still can't control his much and it's not like we can really fight using this ship to its best effect anyway. Unless you're willing to help us against these crews Robin?"

Robin shook her head, looking away from Nami's look of hope. "No. This is close enough to Alabasta that such an action would no doubt be noticed, no matter how sneaky I am about doing so. I cannot be seen helping you in that manner."

"You do know that it's coming up to decision time, right?" Luffy asked looking at her, not seeming worried about the upcoming fight at all. "You're going to have to make a choice very soon as to whether or not to go back to Crocodile or keep working with us."

"Yes, I know." Robin said simply. "It will not bring me any pleasure to do so, but..." She shrugged, both sadness and iron determination in her face. "As I've said, I have kept my options open for a reason."

Zoro looked at her coldly, one hand falling to his swords again. "You know if you to try to betray us, especially now, we have no reason to keep you around."

"Enough," Luffy cut in, halting the discussion. "We have a bigger problem at the moment."

He gestured, and the others looked to see around forty or so ships all bearing the flag of Baroque Works racing towards them. The wind was at their back now, not the Resolve, so it was doubtful they could get away without being fired upon.

Considering the numbers against them, the problem of ship-to-ship fighting, and the sheer number of cannons those other ships might have, Luffy sighed, then smirked, his blue eyes darkening dangerously. "Oh well. I know something that will change Robin's mind and get rid of this problem for us."

Standing beside his captain Zoro looked at Luffy, then across at the ships coming towards them, then back to Luffy, not quite understanding. The others too all looked confused at first.

Sanji was the first to get it, and he gulped a little, flicking out his cigarette to one side and lighting a new one before taking a long drag on it. "Are you sure you're going to be able to control **it**?" He asked seriously.

"Yes. I'm not enraged right now, so **it** will be easy enough to control. Though you all might want to step back a little," Luffy said simply.

Nami swallowed, realizing what he was talking about and not liking the idea at all but seeing no real alternative. "H-he's right. Let's head back to the stern of the ship."

Robin looked at her quizzically, then over to Vivi who also didn't seem to have any idea of what they were talking about. *Only the ones from East Blue seem to. Something he used there, some technique or other? Yet what technique or martial art skill could be so powerful as to deal with over forty galleons of people at this range?*

"This will be interesting. I don't remember much about the time you used **it** back at the Baratie," Zoro said, the only one not to have moved. Even Sanji had decided that discretion was the better part of valor, while Makino had moved to the center of the ship and was readying her pistols. But Zoro stood by Luffy's side, his arms crossed. "You going to have to wait until they're within cannon range to start?"

"Yeah. The further away they are, the less effective my attack'll be. We'll have to wait until they are all at least just hitting cannon range," Luffy said with a shrug. "Why?"

"Then I'll deflect any cannonballs that are coming our way. I might not be able to cut through them yet, but I can at least change their direction," Zoro said with a smirk. He pulled his bandana over his head, then placed Wado Ichimonji into his mouth, pulling both his other swords out and holding them to his sides.

"I'll take the starboard until they are within range. You take port," Luffy said, and the two of them went to work for a few moments as the lead ships began to fire on their schooner. Watching them both Chopper and Robin, who had not seen the two of them in action like this before, were impressed. Then Sanji joined in, literally kicking into the air and then kicking out, smashing cannonballs aside or into one another like so many nine pins, wincing occasionally at the impacts but continuing on gamely.

But it didn't seem to be doing enough to deter the enemy ships. More and more ships closed into firing range as the ship continued on its path. The ships facing them then spread out to encircle them. Soon voices could be heard over the waves during breaks in the cannon fire. There were shouts of, "Get them! Kill the Princess! If we can kill the Princess we'll be promoted to single digits!"

"Close enough?" Zoro asked, grunting as he deflected cannonball from the port side of the ship before moving back to his former position.

Luffy nodded. "Close enough." With a deep breath and closed eyes, Luffy reached within himself and slowly unchained the beast that was the Haoshoku. When his eyes opened he

glared, his face solidifying into a stern, cold expression like that of an angry king as his will lashed out in a wave of power.

The crew at the back of the ship were hit with the equivalent to a light zephyr in comparison to what the rest of the people within his range felt at that moment. But it was still enough to put Vivi and Chopper on their knees and shake Robin and Nami, though Nami got over it quickly. The other three were staring wide-eyed as a literal ripple in the universe almost seemed to form for a moment, moving out from where Luffy was standing in the foredeck.

Their reaction was nothing in comparison to the effect on the Baroque Works agents on the ships surrounding them when the ripple struck them. They felt the true weight of the Haoshoku. Hundreds, then thousands of them collapsed where they had stood, foaming like rabid animals while their minds broke under the pressure of Luffy's will.

Cannons fell silent as the crewmen working on them collapsed. The men steering their ships fell, losing control of their ships, while above them people in the masts fell, some dying on impact of course, while others simply broke bones but still did not wake up from their stupor. Entire boarding parties collapsed in heaps.

Ships which had been in tight formation or even jockeying for position crashed together. Others listed badly as their tillers tried to turn them one way and the wind pushed them in another. All was confusion and hysteria as the ships crashed, collided, or otherwise fell away from the Resolve.

"Y-you see why I have such faith in him even against a Shichibukai?" Nami said shakily, helping Vivi to her feet. The blue-haired girl threw her arms around her friend's shoulders, shaking and gasping from her first brush with the demon Luffy held caged within him.

"What, what was that!?" Robin said, her eyes wide and staring. While she hadn't quite fallen to the deck, she was still badly shaken. Words utterly failed her for a moment as she tried to come to grips with what had just happened.

"He says it's the ultimate form of haki," Sanji said unsteadily, putting a cigarette to Banchi's mouth and lighting it, though the turtle had surprisingly dealt with the wave better than several of the others. Carue, for example, was still out of it, and Vivi was only now moving away from Nami to stand on her own wobbly feet.

"It is called Haoshoku. We learned of it from...a friend who said you have to be born with that ability and then train to learn how to control it," Makino said, smiling and reloading her pistol calmly having dealt with it far better than anyone else. Even Zoro had taken a step back, shaking his head before throwing off the effect, while Makino had simply stayed where she was, using her pistol's fire to target gunners on the attacking ships.

Looking at her fellow crewmen, Makino smiled lightly, though it did not reach her normally kind eyes. "It's called Haoshoku, the power of a king. Pure **will** made manifest. The stronger the will, the greater the power, and I don't know anyone with more willpower than Monkey D. Luffy."

Robin nodded slowly, her eyes wide at this show of power. Abruptly she strode forward and was standing right behind Luffy as he turned away from doing whatever he had just done. *He doesn't even look tired*, a part of Robin's mind noted numbly.

Yet it was indeed decision time, and she needed to make it. She now knew that Luffy was tough enough to take on Crocodile. So the only question became whether he would be willing to help Robin achieve her dream.

"There is a thing I need to read," Robin said bluntly, standing within a few inches of Luffy, her chest almost pressing into his they were so close. "It is called the Rio poneglyph, and it choreographs the World's true history, including in particular the so-called Void Century. It has been my dream, my all-consuming goal since before I was even given my bounty. And it is within this country. Crocodile wants me to read it for his own reasons, which I do not think will occur. And he knows where it is, which I do not. That is one secret he has kept from me successfully, though how he discovered it I don't know. But I need access to that poneglyph!"

Her voice was somewhere between focused and obsessed, Luffy reflected, a very dangerous sort of voice. It was the same sort of voice Luffy heard when Zoro spoke about how he wanted to be the greatest swordsman in the world, or when any of the others talked about their dreams. *She really would fit in with this crew, wouldn't she?* "I'll help you find it then," Luffy said simply.

"Then I agree to this alliance," Robin said, before changing the subject smoothly. "Crocodile will not shift from his position at his casino which is called Rain Dinners, not even if he hears about this, which I don't think he will, not quickly, not until these people recover. But we need up to date information, and if news about my betrayal has not reached them from before this, I can get that when we go ashore. After that I can plot us the straightest route to Crocodile's main base quickly and efficiently, though we might come under attack from long-range thanks to Crocodile's powers. He has the power to control, create and turn into sand."

"That would make him very dangerous in a desert kingdom, wouldn't it?" Luffy mused, nodding. "Still, that doesn't mean he's invulnerable. Even without Busoshoku I could figure out a way to hurt him, I think." He smiled, reaching out his hand, though he only had to do it a little ways considering how close they were. "Good to have you with us, Robin."

"Thank you, Captain-san," Robin said smiling, taking his hand in hers. For the first time she felt the flickering of something, something another person would've called hope. Even though Robin didn't realize it, that hope was based on the idea that she could not only achieve her dream, but live afterwards and maybe find a place she really belonged.

That had never been a real consideration for her before. She just wanted to know the truth. Robin had never worried about what happened afterwards; she could die happily then, and over the last decade she had wondered if perhaps that was for the best. But now, now as the Resolve moved toward the port leaving chaos in its wake, Robin felt that undefinable feeling rising within her, and she wondered where it might lead.

End Chapter

No Mr. 2 meeting obviously, since there was no reason for him to be sent out, and since Croc knows that Robin might have thrown in her lot with Luffy, well... things are going to be very different from here on. Heh...heh...

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed the chapter!