

This is the winner of the small story poll. Sorry it's come out so late in the month, but I lost the first ten days of the month to RL time and editing the last chapter of ATP. I will be posting another chapter of Making Waves here and doing something over on A03 as well... maybe.

This has been edited by Tomon and Hiryo, who astonishingly turned it around in under 48 hours!

Chapter 36: Plans Going Right, Plans Going Wrong

The bounty Hunter 'Ranko' stared down when the Den Den Mushi shut off, as Brook did the same from beside her and Makino simply sighed. "Of course, of freaking course," Luffy muttered. "No plan I make can ever go to actual freaking plan. The world just doesn't work that way."

"What do you think we should do, Ranko?" Makino asked, frowning. While she wasn't very close to Camie, the girl was something of a friend and her impromptu arrival aboard the Everlasting Resolve had turned their fortunes around entirely. The three crews had been barely a day away from starvation, and without the fish that Camie, however inadvertently, had led to the ship, they would have died like so many other sailors had on the ocean, underestimating the Grand Line.

Furthermore, there was the entire principal to consider. *No one should live in fear of being enslaved, or live as a slave at all*, she thought angrily. Yet at the same time, there was the plan to consider, and Ace. For all that he had run off to sea as soon as he could get away from Garp and Dadan, Ace was one of her little brothers, and she definitely wanted to do what she could to save him. If that meant prioritizing the plan over Camie, well...

Brook let loose a low, not at all humorous chuckle. "Yohohohoho, I do believe that saving such a beautiful wonder such as Camie should take precedent over everything, but I will admit to being biased. Every fiber of my being screams to save the girl, even if I am only bones. Yohohohoho, Skull Joke!"

"I wouldn't go that far, but..." Luffy thought for a moment, then held out a hand for the Den Den Mushi, calling for Nami. After a few rings, Nami answered and Luffy asked, "Have you heard?"

"We did, I've already sent the cook. He'll change out of his current costume, and see if he can find Camie," the orangeite replied, going on to mention the number of the grove where Sanji would be starting from, taking care never to use names just in case the communication was somehow overheard.

As the younger girl spoke, Makino pulled out a map of the archipelago they had been using. She pointed first at where they were, which was in the high forties, having left the grove they had met Bonney in far behind in their search for a restaurant Big Eater hadn't already assaulted. "Camie was taken from the bar here, the park, which covers Grove 32 through 34," she mused, tapping a finger down on the marker of the amusement park thoughtfully. "And our blond companion is starting from here. If we make straight down this way, basically creating a cross pattern, which is as good a search pattern as any I can think of."

Makino looked up at Luffy. "If, that is we are setting the plan to one side."

"We're not. We'll search the area around us between here and the amusement park for now, and then head straight down-number to Grove 1," Luffy answered. "Remember what we learned from the locals, there's this touring vice admiral here, Gisele of the Flash Sword, or something? She's almost undoubtedly looking for Mr. Slice-a-lot. With that going our way and the cook already looking for Camie, we need to be ready to switch back to the plan when we can."

"Oh, and what plan is this, exactly?" Bonney demanded from where she was sitting across from the three bounty hunters. While sitting and having a meal with them, as she was grilled by Makino about her interest in Ace, and, although she would sooner tear out an eye than admit it, getting some good romance advice from Makino and Ranko when the call came in over their Den Den Mushi. Now, though, she was wondering what these three bounty hunters were hiding, although she was somewhat amused, they had seemingly forgotten her presence. *It's been a long ass time since anyone just forgot I was around.*

Luffy looked up at her, her gaze shifting from surprised to calculating, almost reptilian as she did. *I know I used nicknames for the guys, but was that still too much? Should I remove this gal?* To keep the plan going and save her brother, Luffy would cheerfully knock Bonney out and either bring her along as another bounty or worse.

It took all of Bonney's willpower not to shiver, but the feeling of danger didn't last long as Makino patted the shorter girl's shoulder. "None of that! Bonney's a pirate, she's not a marine or even a local. We don't have to worry about her writing to the authorities, do we? She asked, looking over at Jewelry Bonney.

At that, Bonney spat to one side, despite the fact they were sitting in a nice, somewhat upscale restaurant. "You fucking trying to insult me, Ranko? I'd never have anything to do with those government bastards!"

A nearby waiter stared incredulously at the bit of spittle by his foot, making to open his mouth to protest, or maybe bellow the bitch and her friends out of the restaurant. But a look at the pink haired woman and remembering who she was, stilled his tongue and he twisted away instead of coming any closer to the table. *Nope! They can do without another round of ale. Pity though, I wish I could hear what they were talking about.*

Making a point to check in with that guy and apologize for their table-mates' poor manners, after all, a bit of kindness and Beli might convince the waiter and the maître d' they hadn't seen the trio of Bounty Hunters meeting with Bonney, Luffy shrugged looking over at Makino, before her gaze shifted onto Bonney once more. "You got a point, but I don't think we should share more than we already have. And I'll ask formally, Bonney, do we have your word you'll keep quiet about the conversation you just heard?"

"Since I don't even know what secret you all are keeping sure," Bonney answered with her own shrug. "Why should I care what you all are up to?"

"In that case," Ranko went on, standing up and gesturing Makino and Brook to do the same. "We should get going. Brook, I'll carry you on my back once we're in the air. We'll need to use Geppo to cover as much ground as possible. And if we don't find her within the next hour or so, I'm going this to assume she isn't around and go straight down to the lower numbers."

"Why?" Makino asked, frowning. *I can understand mentioning Geppo, although I wager Luffy will just use Kenbunshoku instead, but why go straight to the lower numbers?*

"Because that's where H...Hanna said the human auction house is, which is where Camie will almost undoubtedly wind up eventually," Luffy answered, changing Hancock's name at the last minute. Of all the portions of their plan, keeping Hancock's involvement in their plan secret was one of the most important.

That caused all of his listeners to grimace, even Bonney, who usually didn't care one way or another for other people's troubles, she was a pirate after all. Yet even so, she knew about the slavery the Celestial Dragons and World Government allowed. Which brought up an interesting question, really, especially given the redhead's reaction to the Tenryubito they'd seen earlier. "You realize that if you go there, you might run into the other Celestial Dragons reported to be in the Archipelago? What are you going to do if you do? And they want this Camie girl of yours?"

Even the mention of that particular subgroup of humanity, although in Luffy's opinion that point was debatable, caused Luffy's teeth to grind, and her fingers began to carve out rivulets table in front of them. "That depends on if they get in my way... or if they give me an excuse."

"Are you serious?!" Bonney rolled her eyes. "I would've thought you'd have learned from earlier today, you don't want to mess with the Celestial Dragons! They are far more trouble than they're worth. Remember that assaulting one is going to bring down an Admiral on your ass at the very least."

Luffy shrugged, showing no fear at that idea, astonishing – and horrifying – Bonney further. "Like I said, we'll see."

With that, Luffy stood up, tipped her cowboy hat to the other woman signaling they were ready to leave, laying on her accent a bit thicker than normal. "It was interestin' Jewelry Bonney, but we gotta go. Stay safe, and if I were you, I'd think 'bout getting' away from this island... quickly."

For several moments after the three pirates left the restaurant, Bonney sat thoughtfully, finishing off the meal they had all ordered.

She only looked up when her first mate moved over from another table asking quietly, "Well Captain, this is another eatery we've eaten out of all of its food. So the question is, are we going to follow that bounty hunter's suggestion?"

Bonney thought about it for a moment, humming as she gestured for Rudolph, her first mate and navigator to gather up the crew. He was the one she leaned on the most when it came to anything sailing related, and his point was a good one. Initially, Bonney and her crew had thought about heading to the slave auction, maybe to find some slaves to buy or liberate and add to their number.

When it came to total combat power, Bonney knew that none of her crew members were anywhere close to her own level. They were Paradise tough, but nothing special, no way would they be able to handle the New World without a power up. But as it was, that felt like a decidedly stupid idea.

So instead, Bonney shook her head. *I ain't gonna go out of my way to court trouble, not with the fishbowl wearing assholes or the marines.* "The ship better be loaded with supplies, or heads will roll. Regardless, we're not staying here to see how it all plays out. We'll stay within range of our spyglass, but I don't think we want to be here for the fireworks that are going to start soon."

And why do I think that those fireworks are part of what those three bounty hunters are after, if they really are bounty hunters at all...

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Elsewhere on the island, Zoro scowled as he stared up at the number on the tree above him, showing a 42, and then down to the paper Nami had prepared for him. "What the hell! These numbers don't do shit, they're all over the place. Or do these groves somehow move? They're supposed to be part of bigger trees, right? Trees can sometimes move their branches around, right?"

Despite the snickering from a few bystanders who had heard him, that seemed more logical to Zoro's mind than his just being lost, and he shook his head, scowling, while the locals hurried away, still snickering to one another. Zoro found himself in a semi-lawful area, apparently heading towards where the amusement park was supposed to be. At least,

according to the number of signs get begot recently. "But who knows if those are right, I mean the numbers aren't any good."

Worse, this sure as heck isn't the kind of place where I could cause trouble with other pirates. And Zoro was reluctant to start trouble with the locals. He scowled, then groaned deciding to bite the bullet and find someone to give him directions.

Zoro was completely unaware of what was going on elsewhere on the island. After all, it would have been a very bad idea for him to be seen talking into a Den Den Mushi, and it getting back to the marines. Or worse, having a Den Den Mushi on his person when he was captured by the marines.

However, as he approached one of the locals, he saw the man's face twitch, and watched as he stared behind Zoro. At the same time, he heard the tramp of boots behind him before a female voice called out. "Are you the Pirate hunter Zoro? Although why you're still known as the pirate hunter when you're a pirate now is beyond me."

Zoro turned and found himself facing what looks like an entire column of Marines. Each of them was wielding a rifle, a sword strapped to their sides. At the front of the column stood an officer, a woman with dark hair, who looked to be in her mid-thirties, wearing what looked like a permanent smirk on her face. She was tall, and well built, with long tied back curly black hair, a mole on her left eye and red lipstick with a coat marked with pink and a black widow spider tattoo.

But what most interested Zoro was the sword at her side. Even in its brown sheath the sword was obviously of a high quality, possibly better quality than Tashigi's. And the way she was playing with the pommel, the way her fingers flexed, her stance, loose but ready, her eyes watching him... *This woman... she's strong.*

Slowly, Zoro pulled out his bandana, tying it in place before his hand fell back down to the three swords at his side and he addressed the woman, moving away from the civilian he had been approaching, who took this cue to run away. Doing so, Zoro noticed that there were other marines who had snuck into the small village and were now rushing people out of the area. *Smart.* "Yeah, I'm Zoro, although I have no idea about the Pirate Hunter thing either. It isn't like I cared much about that when I was a bounty hunter. And you are?"

"I'm Vice Admiral Gion, and I'm here to arrest you. Come quietly, and I might let you keep all your limbs," Gion said, her tone taunting, an obvious attempt to get a rise out of the pirate in front of her, as her troops fanned out around her.

Zoro grunted, then shook his head, patting one of the swords at his side. "I would dishonor the spirits of my blades if I even thought about giving myself up no matter what kind of odds I'm facing."

Gion nodded and without another word, unsheathed her blade, crossing the intervening distance at the same time, her sword striking out in an *lai* technique. Gion was so fast, both with the technique and how she covered the ground between them, that she nearly took Zoro by surprise. He was only able to pull Wado Ichimonji out in time to block her blow, the swords, caught against one another.

Zoro grinned, locking his blade against Gion's, feeling the strength of the woman's strike. *Heh, so she really is strong, good.*

With that thought, Zoro went for a low kick while still maintaining the block, something he would never have tried before training with Luffy, having previously seen using his body as anything but a vehicle for his blades being against his code. But he had come to understand such things were at times necessary, that in many ways, the best swordsman had to be one of the best all-around fighters too.

The woman leaped up over the kick, disengaging from the lock. Her sword flashed out in a series of attacks, precise and economical, all the power coming from her one hand, as her other became covered in *Busoshoku*, an automatic defense against any return strikes.

Still grinning under his bandana Zoro blocked or redirected her blows, before launching his own attack. Even when the woman blocked it with her *Busoshoku*-clad arm, it pushed Gion back, gaining him some space. This allowed him time to pull out another one of his blades, the cursed blade *Sandai Kitetsu*. This he used to block her next few blows, while he used Wado Ichimonji to deflect bullets which came at him from the other marines at the same time.

Gion whistled in appreciation for the pirate's sword skill before blinking in surprise as he pulled out his final blade, flicking his white-hilted blade up to his mouth, catching it in his jaw so that the blade pointed out to the side. "Wait, you really do use three swords? I mean, that says something for your swords swallowing skills bu... yow!"

She was forced to dodge a *Rising Tatsu Maki* as Zoro modified the move on the fly, attacking her former position, and hurling up a blast of air pressure after her when Gion leaped into the air. The edge of the air pressure assault cut her officer's coat in several places along with her skirt and cut her along one thigh but didn't break her skin anywhere else as she responded twisting in place faster than most could follow, her own air pressure attack shattering Zoro's. "Drilling Spiral!"

The pirate swordsman however had already moved, dodging her attack.

But just then cannons boomed and cannonballs zoomed towards him. The last few civilians had been hurried out of the village by this point, and the cannons the marines had brought forward could engage him now. Only a few had gotten into position yet, however, the others were still moving forward to try and attack Zoro from different angles.

Unfortunately for the group who had just fired, Gion was out of position to protect them from Zoro's assault.

Somewhat pleased by this band of marines continuing to show actual concern for the people they were supposed to protect, Zoro pulled his next strike, not using the full power of his Shisui-assisted 120 Pound Cannon. Instead, he only using a 72 Pound Cannon, hurling the attack down the road towards the marines.

They screamed and leaped away, and most were able to escape the radius of the assault, although their cannons were cut apart like so many bits of flotsam, smoothly sliced chunks raining everywhere. One marine fell, his leg sliced badly, but still attached, while another fell back, his chest cut across, yet not dead, not with immediate medical attention anyway.

Then Zoro leaped upwards towards the descending Gion, the two meeting in midair bouncing around one another.

Gion's sword went from a series of swift cuts and wide slashes to thrusting, the shift so quick and smooth most swordsman in the world would never have seen it coming. "Breaking Fusillade!"

Instead of attacking Zoro, Gion switched tactics with this move, attacking his blades, looking to shatter them in a series of hard strikes, her blade covered in Busoshoku. But after a few seconds of barely dodging his return strikes via Kami-E, Gion realized that there was no sign of the white-hilted blade giving out under her consecutive strikes. "Well, they were right about your skill, but the reports made no mention about your swords. Clearly the people compiling those reports knew nothing about quality."

Zoro replied to this with a nod, the nod of one artist acknowledging the skill of another, before he twisted around. His own blades were suddenly covered with Busoshoku, something that caused Gion's eyes to widen as she found her sword caught between them, Zoro's third blade lashing out in a cut. The cut struck, but Gion had pulled her own Busoshoku out to cover her body.

When a Busoshoku-covered limb was struck by a similarly covered weapon, the willpower of the individuals came into play. If the willpower of one was far greater, the opponent's Busoshoku would be overcome, either slicing into the victim's body or the Haki covering the blade breaking, possibly alongside the sword itself. But if the combatant's willpower was even, then the attacks would simply bounce off one another, unless you used one of the even more advanced techniques.

Hmm... is it time to use Emission here? No, I don't think he's worth it, besides, I'm having fun here. Gion thought, as she used the impact to leap backward, before giving voice to that

thought, her warrior's soul singing as she used a mix of Soru and Geppo to get behind Zoro. "Hah, that's the way, this will be fun!"

"HAH!" Zoro turned, but not fast enough and took several strikes, blocking them with his own Busoshoku, standing his ground with some difficulty, given the force behind her strikes. He couldn't recover the initiative though and was pressed back as Gion bounced around him.

Her style in midair almost reminded Zoro of Luffy although not as in-your-face as his captain was, nor quite as mobile or wild. Still, it was obvious she had mastered the Rokushiki to a degree that even the jaguar-bastard hadn't. Indeed, now and then she used the Kami-E technique, dodging a strike from Zoro by the thinnest of margins to return her own, turning it on and off with an ease that was just crazy. It made landing any hits of his own a hell of a lot tougher than any opponent he had faced before.

Yet at the same time, Gion was thrown off by the three swords style Zoro was using. Most of her attempts to strike through his guard were blocked or directed by Wado Ichimonji. That was quite annoying.

Each time they clashed there was a booming, ringing noise through the air, causing many of the bystanders in their houses to quail. Occasionally when one or the other redirected a strike, the energy of those attacks continue on. Although at present they were fighting in the air above the small village, the Yarukiman Mangrove branches around the village had no protection. Dozens of them fell, the road below was blasted and cratered, and more than one building lost its roof as they fought on.

"Bring up more of the cannons!" shouted an officer below. "We need to help the admiral!"

"Yeah, our bullets aren't doing anything," another marine grumbled. "Damn Busoshoku."

Above, the two swordsmen had kicked it up another notch. Zoro had used another Tatsu Maki to pull away from Gion, only to need to dodge a cut from her blade as she dissipated the air pressure attack with a single swing of her sword before she closed. But even that brief window had allowed Zoro to seize the moment. "Two Sword Style, Otoro!"

The attack crashed through Gion's guard slamming into her Busoshoku clad body hurling her down to the ground where she crashed into the earth in front of where her men were hastily unlimbering two more of the cannons they had brought along.

From, the air above the marines Zoro grinned, whispering, "Time to stop holding back your strength, Shisui. 120 Pound Cannon!!"

The saw-edged tornado of cutting force that flashed out from his blades as he whirled in place put to shame every attack he had used since fighting Oz and Moria back on Thriller Bark. It was wider than he was tall and cut through the tops of the intervening buildings and the ground in front of the marines on the outskirts of the village as it closed on them, a whirling dervish of destruction.

Yet even as the marines behind her paled, Gion pushed to her feet, her blade poised at her side. "Bursting Thrust!"

With that, she thrust forward with her blade, creating a spear of cutting force to counter the nearly wild buzzsaw of Zoro's, so condensed that it looked solid instead of the near energy state of the pirate's assault. The two attacks crashed into one another, and there was a sound of dueling sonic booms for a second before Gion's more controlled attack stabbed through Zoro's, bursting it.

Zoro gaped for a second, then leaped to the side, dodging most of the attack coming his way. Yet even so, his Busoshoku was nearly broken when his leg got clipped by the technique, sending him crashing down to the ground. This left a long, thin cut behind, as if he had just gotten the world's worst papercut, blood flowing freely down the side of his lower leg into his pants.

But Zoro could almost be called a masochist with the level of pain tolerance, and he rolled with it, hopping to his feet. When Gion rushed towards him, he was waiting. *Time to use one of my new attacks!* "Yakkodori!"

This attack, somewhat like his 36 Pound Cannon was far more concentrated, the slicing force almost appearing like a bird flying on its side made of blue. It also was far faster, and Gion could not dodge or deflect it. Although the hit didn't hurt, the powerful strike still sent her hurling backward.

Still, she whirled, using the momentum to launch her attack once more. "Bloody Cutter!"

The cutting force had a reddish tinge this time, leaving a heat haze behind it. The strike acted almost like a living thing for a second, as it twisted and arched in from the side. Zoro grunted as it flicked around his defense to smack into his chest, nearly getting through his Busoshoku again despite Zoro's best efforts to dodge the strike, and another long, thin cut opened up on his body. *FUCK, this woman is good. If she keeps on coming at me, I don't think my getting captured is going to be feigned at all... damn it. That means I need to break off, doesn't it?*

Yet even as he grunted in pain, his sword bounced off her arm, redirecting her next strike as Shisui slammed down on her shoulder with punishing force, deadening Gion's off-arm from the strike despite her Busoshoku holding against the strike. Gion grunted, going to one

knee, trying hard to keep an expression of shock off her face. *Holy flipping, can he use Emission already!? Wait... no, that blade is the only one that has that strength... a true Black Blade then? I had best keep from being struck by it then.*

This allowed her troops to get involved once more. Several men fired their rifles at Zoro, while two cannons a group of marines had been moving around the right side of the village finally got the range. They fired at him from both sides, bracketing his position.

Zoro ignored the musket balls, but cut the cannonballs coming his way, snarling in annoyance as he lashed out in either direction, a 24 Pound Cannon blast aimed at the two cannons. The attacks were noticeably different in their power, the one from the Shisui so large it still cut the houses on either side of the marines into pieces, while the one launched from Sandai only cut up the ground and the cannon, as well as the marines behind it, who were not quick enough to escape this time.

Three marines to one side of the cannon fell blood streaming from numerous cuts. But on the other side of the now ruined weapon, men flew as if hit by a giant, blood erupting from their bodies as they lost limbs.

Snarling in fury, Gion rose from her kneeling position, lashing out with a kick that hit Zoro in the stomach, lifting him off the ground, while flicking her wrist, her blade moving in a series of tiny circles. "Power Blow!"

The next second Zoro nearly lost his grip on Shisui and Sandai even as he blocked her strike with them, despite both being covered by Busoshoku. The sheer power of the hit smashed Zoro out of the air as if he was a baseball, hurling him into and through one of the buildings, which began to fall behind him.

Seeing no one had been in the house, Gion changed tactics a little, hoping to blind and close with Zoro to finish him off. "Roaring Hydra!" Gion shouted, whirling her sword above her head and thrusting it forward once more in a series of strikes at various angles.

This time the air pressure blasts were wider in nature, looser, picking up and breaking portions of the rubble as they came. They were made to obscure the environment, which Gion hoped to use to attack Zoro from behind. It would also cover her marines so they could move forward to help their fellows, which they did promptly.

Landing on the other side of the building he'd passed through, Zoro found his eyesight obscured momentarily by the dust and debris of the house being struck by Gion's attack. Nonetheless, he rolled to the side, putting one of the Yarukiman mangrove branches between him and the dust, then moving out to the side, trying either to flank the village or get away. *For the plan to work, Luffy's got to be a part of arresting me. We can't assume that the Aho-cook will be able to break off from the Witch and the rest of them fast enough to join the plan. Which means I need to get away, blast it.*

A moment later, he turned back and looked for the village, only to stare at a series of trees. There was no village or any marines in sight. Zoro had completely turned around and literally left the grove he had been, passing over a dirt bridge into another grove without realizing it. "Seriously! These things really do move around, don't they?"

Behind Zoro, Gion scowled as she landed in the dust, trying to use her Kenbunshoku to find him, only to realize he wasn't anywhere within the dust cloud she had created. Indeed, he didn't seem to be anywhere nearby. "Wh, what the hell?"

As the dust began to clear, she looked at her marines as they came forward. "Did any of you see him burst out of the dust?"

None of them could answer a question, and Gion bit her lip, closing her eyes and concentrating on her Kenbunshoku for a moment. But she wasn't the best with that technique, and while she could sense a few people still moving away from the village in various places, she couldn't tell which one was Zoro. "Blast it, so much for being an honorable swordsman!"

A thought occurred to her and Gion blinked, realizing the whole fight had been spent with Zoro moving to one or the other edges of the village. "D, did Zoro plan out the entire fight so he could get away?"

Shaking her head in surprise, and a tiny modicum of respect at that thought, Gion turned back to her marines. "First Officer Stevens, keep on spreading out with our trackers. Daniels, keep on seeing to the wounded."

Gion grimaced then, noticing that one of the wounded was the commodore of the base. *Davy Jones horribly horrid testicles, I don't want to do this, but regulations are regulations. I can't exactly rake him over the coals for not having followed them if I break them in turn.* "Commodore Wilkins, assemble a detail of four to transport yourself and the other wounded back to the base. When you return you will resume command of the base. I expect you to prepare the base for further wounded and assemble local transportation to send after us."

The locals had access to Yarukiman sap, which made for excellent transportation help. Indeed, the bubble-using cannon carts were far more mobile than their normal equivalent and had been why the cannon crews had been able to move around the battlefield so easily.

"Y, yes, Sir!" the commodore responded, happy that he was getting away from the action at the cost of several cuts across his chest and legs.

"Sir, we've got a faint trail leading away from the last known location of Zoro. It... it er, wanders a lot, but we might be able to follow it," a runner reported, pointing out towards where Stevens and the other trackers were still visible in the forest, spreading out as she watched. They were also seemingly shaking their head in confusion at what the tracks were saying.

Gion saw that, and took it as another sign that Zoro might be some kind of tactical genius. *After all, how else would he be able to get away, cover so much space I couldn't pick him out with my Kenbunshoku?* "Good. We'll try to follow the trail for a bit, but if we lose it, we'll head right down to the lawless areas and start a grove-by-grove sweep." A glint entered her eyes and her crew all winced, some of them murmuring prayers for the Pirate Hunter's soul as she went on. "That pirate is not getting away!"

As her men and his own who would be remaining with the admiral cheered, the commodore blanched, wondering if Gion had any idea how long that might take. *Maybe I should call in reinforcements? And wasn't the report that there could be up to three Straw Hats who escaped the ambush? Vice Admiral Gion might need some help, whatever she might think.*

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In the skies above the island, Sanji bounced away from the ship, once more dressed as he normally did: black pants, black dress jacket, white undershirt. Even his hair was again in its normal style and he could not be happier. "Yes, yes, this is the way to be, dressed as the dapper gentleman I am, off to rescue a damsel from durance vile. Yes!" he enthused, bouncing through the sky in an ever-widening spiral.

Sanji didn't have sensing technique like Luffy, so had to rely on his old fashion sense. Yet his eyes were good, and from up here he could swoop in and examine anyone he thought suspicious. Alas, of which there weren't many.

After about thirty minutes, Sanji gave up on this idea. "Blast it, of course the kidnappers wouldn't go up-number since the higher numbers are far more law-abiding." Then again, maybe all they would have to do is to slap a slave collar on. Then they'd be fine, the cook thought, his thoughts extremely dark. Like the rest of his crew, Sanji abhorred the idea of slavery. Especially the enslavement of pretty girls.

"Slave girl costumes are one thing, actual slaves is quite another," Sanji mused, before shaking his head. He wasn't getting anywhere like this. "Best to head into the lawless zones and start asking some questions from its denizens. Time to go, what it Luffy call it in Alabasta, fishing for idiots? As good a name as any I suppose."

Later, Sanji saw something in the distance, a whirling dervish of air pressure rising from one of the other groves. He stared at it for a few seconds, then shook his head. "That has got to be Zoro. But whatever he's up to, and whatever the state of the plan, Camie must be rescued first."

With that, Sanji turned away resolutely from that sight, shifting around it at long range and continuing on towards the lawless zone. He did not notice the glint of a spyglass near where Zoro's attack had appeared, nor did he know then that he had been spotted.

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"What did you see?" Commodore Wilkins demanded, staring at his man with the spyglass.

"A man using Geppo sir, wearing a suit. He had blond hair," the man reported. "That's all I could see before my line of sight was blocked."

Wilkins blinked, and then his eyes widened in shock as his brain, perhaps because of the battle against Zoro, leaped to the right conclusion. "Black Leg Sanji. Damn it, we were told reports mentioned that two or maybe even three of the Straw Hats survived. So he's here too!?" Wilkins scowled for a moment, remembering how tough Zoro was, then nodded resolutely. "Push the pace everyone! We need to get back to base and call this in. Admiral Gion may need some help."

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"Three hundred thousand? That's it? I bring you an untouched, possibly even virginal, mermaid. And all I get for it is a measly three hundred thousand?" Peterman scowled down at a far smaller man dressed in an extremely flashy way, complete with star-shaped sunglasses while being inside. This was the manager of the human auction house, or, as the world Government put it, the Human Resource Allocation Center, named Disco. "I want a cut of the real profits!"

The man rolled his eyes so obviously that Peterman could understand he was doing it without even being able to see his eyes, shaking his head as he pointed at the girl. "She's a little bruised, and she won't stop crying. Both of those take away from her resale value. So does the fact that she isn't actually all that good looking in comparison to other mermaids. She isn't nearly as top-heavy as most of the prime mermaids I've seen are. Oh, she's got the cute thing going for her, I suppose but cute doesn't sell as well as sexy."

"That has more to do with how you're selling them than anything else," Peterman protested. "And when was the last time you had a mermaid anyway? You know hunting them has been almost impossible since Whitebeard declared Mermaid Island part of his territory. We only see one or two every few years."

The man conceded that point and said he would go up a further fifty thousand. Peterman argued back saying, "A hundred thousand more, and a cut of the profits."

"I'll give you a hundred thousand more than my starting price, but I won't give you any part of the actual profits. And if you think you can argue or take her back now that I've got one of my explosive collars on her, remember whose flag waves above this place," Disco warned.

For a moment, Peterman looked as if he was still going to argue, before he subsided, shaking his head and agreeing to the new price. The two of them walked off, leaving the mermaid in the bowl that Peterman had manhandled her into when they first arrived, so that Disco could view Cammy in her natural environment.

"So, how did they catch you?" a voice asked from one side. "I thought that mermaids were so fast in the water they were nearly impossible to catch. And that all of you would be smart enough to not come ashore here in the Archipelago."

Camie looked in that direction, gasping a bit in surprise, not having realized there were other slaves watching her. An old gentleman sat there, his legs crossed in front of him, his back against the wall as if he had all the time in the world. The fact that he had a slave collar on didn't seem to bother him.

"I, I my friends took me to see the amusement park. If they had been around when these guys attacked me, they never would've gotten past them, but well... ride, food and bathroom break in that order separated them from me," Camie answered morosely.

"Ah I see, ill fortune played a part in your current predicament." The old man chuckled at that. "Still, cheer up. If your friends are out there, perhaps they'll launch a rescue?"

"They probably will. They're not native to the area, so I don't know if they will know where to find me, let alone what it means to attack here," Camie gulped. "I, I don't know..."

"Well, we shall see. If nothing else, I might be willing to save you for a kiss. Or several," the man said winking roguish toward Camie, who blushed a bit, before they were interrupted.

"Ignore the old man," a deeper rumbling voice interjected. "He's been saying that kind of thing all day long. Well, the fact he can free us, not the other thing. That would be disturbing."

"Alas, you're not my type, my large friend," the old man simple laugh, and the cavernous voice replied with his own chuckle, before the giant poked his head down to look at Camie.

"We're stuck here girl," he intoned, not unkindly but firmly. "Best you start to act like a docile little slave girl. Maybe if you do, your master will slip up one point, switch that explosive collar with a normal one, and you'll be able to slip away. That's not a possibility for me, I'm afraid."

"But only if your friends don't come for her first," the old man said chuckle. "You seem very certain that that will happen, are you? Or was that just momentary bravado?"

Biting her lip, Camie shrugged her shoulders, thinking about the odd crew of the Everlasting Resolve. "Yes." She couldn't really say anything else, not without saying the friends she had mentioned were members of the Straw Hats, and that their captain was very much alive. Nor could she mention Hancock, as that would be even worse, since she wasn't supposed to be around Shabondy at all.

The old man looked at her, and for a moment, Camie got the impression that he was not looking at her so much as reading her thoughts. The feeling passed quickly, though, and he smiled, leaning back against the wall and propping his feet up once more on the bed. "Well, in that case, I think this could be a very interesting day..."

Shivering a bit, Camie swam around in the bowl, her hands on her collar, tears mingling with the saltwater as she looked around at the other slaves being brought up from the jail underneath the auction house. Some were despondent, their eyes dull, others tried to fight, but were beaten down. A few were just crying, their bodies limp as they were tugged along by chains connected to their collars and hands. All in all, it looked like a scene out of hell to Camie, and she whimpered. *Please, Hatchin, Sanji-chin, Chopper-chin, save me...*

OOOOOOO

Once he was in the lower numbers, maybe fifteen or fourteen, Sanji wasn't certain where one grove ended and the other began, Sanji dropped down to the ground and made his way on foot. Walking along, Sanji whistled cheerfully, acting somewhat like a drunk idiot in order to bring in his prey. Internally though, he was simply marveling once more at the nature of all the massive trees all around him. These trees weren't actually trees after all, just upwards-thrusting branches of the underlying mangrove trees which were under his feet under who knew how many tons of dirt that had built up between branches to the point they created these islands. "Nature really is amazing, especially on the Grand Line. All this makes me wonder what the New World will be like."

As Sanji had hoped, his almost lackadaisical attitude and sharp clothing attracted brigands almost as quickly as honey would flies. Not ten minutes after he began walking, several ruffians broke out around trees around Sanji, and one of them stepped forward, smacking a simple mace into his other hand, a wicked grin on his face. "Alright pretty boy, your money or your life!"

Sanji smiled cheerfully at the man. "Ah, just the sort of people I was looking for."

Then he was moving, and the mace wielder's world became darkness for a moment.

The next thing was to hear someone muttering in the background. "I think that's a good description, my darling angel! Don't worry, we'll find her."

The man faded in and out of consciousness, as the next thing he felt was something slapping him awake. "Wake up Ugly Beauty, wake up, rise and shine."

The mace wielder groaned, before remembering what had happened, his eyes flashing wide. First there had been the well-dressed blonde, and then he was running toward them then... nothing. Now a feeling of discomfort filled him and looking around, the bandit saw the rest of his men tied up, with the man they had been hoping to steal from hopping in front of him in midair almost like the air underneath him was a trampoline. "EEEEEE!! Monster!"

"Now, I don't have much time," Sanji said ignoring the man's screaming. "So, I'm only going to ask you simple questions. I will describe a person, then, you will tell me whatever you know about him. If I think you are lying. I'm going to hurt you. If you think of holding back information, I will hurt you. If you try to make a deal, or try to bluster, I will hurt you. Indeed, the only way out of this predicament for you that doesn't involve pain is to get give me what I want. Do you understand what I am saying, or should I start hurting you?"

His face pale, the bandit shook his head rapidly. "I'll tell you what you need to know!"

"Ah, that's good to hear, I do like dealing with rational people," the blonde man replied, patting the bandit's shoulder causing him to flinch dramatically. "Now, have you ever heard of this man? He wears a green hat, small for his head, tall with extremely broad shoulders, a pointed face and curly black hair. He has a wide, condescending smile and dresses like a little boy in shorts and a loose jacket."

Gulping, the bandit stammered but the description did know who that could be. "That, that sounds like Peterman! He is one of the better bounty hunters and slave catchers in the archipelago. He uses a bow and arrow, has his own crew."

"So, his name is Peterman? And do you know where I can find him?"

The mace wielder shook his head rapidly. "I'm sorry I don't! I've never run afoul of him."

"Ah that's a pity," Sanji muttered, before glaring at the man, "You wouldn't lie to me, would you? While I am normally a calm, levelheaded sort. Lying? Well, as I said before, it would lead to me hurting you. And I don't know if I could stop."

His mild tone and almost regretful expression actually made Sanji's words scarier, and the Mace wielder shook his head rapidly, feeling something trickling down his legs as he stared at the man hopping in midair in front of him like he was simply bouncing on the ground. "I'm sorry I don't know anything more. Peterman! Ask around for Peterman! He's probably somewhere in the lowest numbers, that's all I know!!!"

Sanji nodded. "I do believe you're telling the truth. Thank you." With that, Sanji actually released the mace wielder, and helped him down to the ground. There he gave the man a knife

from one of his other victims patted him once more on one shoulder and left him there to release his fellows as Sanji raced away.

OOOOOOO

High up in the branches of one of the mangrove trees, Luffy sat Indian style on a broad branch, with Makino and Brook both nearby, although the green-haired woman's eyes were firmly shut at present and not to help meditation as Luffy's were.

Eventually Luffy looked up from where she had been meditating, opening her eyes to look at the others. "Found them," she said, shaking her head. "Even after all this time, I'm still getting used to the range I can reach with Kenbunshoku thanks to my little surprise. I can feel from one end of the archipelago."

"Is Sanji close to finding Camie? And have the girls gotten back to the ship yet?" Makino asked.

"The girls are back with Hancock and her crew, heh, Robin's mind is quite distinctive," Luffy chortled, a smile crossing her face at the mention of his current lover and the woman who might be joining that status in the future. "Zoro just finished a fight, I think, and is going in the right direction, towards the lawless groves anyway. He's already in the low twenties. Sanji is lower, in the mid-teens, moving around Shakky's bar and heading even lower. And I can sense a bunch of people marching with one stronger than the rest" Luffy hopped to her feet. "Come on, let's get going. Whatever else, we need to be closer to get in on the action, whatever form it comes in."

"Where?" Brook asked simply.

"We'll head to the Human Auction House for now, hide nearby maybe. If Sanji doesn't arrive, I can get Camie out secretly and then go in search of Zoro or Sanji." Luffy shrugged and then gestured to his back. "Hop aboard Brook. Just remember, you try to do anything funny back there, I will turn your finger bones to powder."

"Yohohohoho, while I am a perverted gentleman, I am a gentleman before I am a pervert," Brook said, shaking his skeletal head. "I would never touch a woman inappropriately. Gaze at her and yearn for her panties, yes. But that is all."

"Oh yes, you're so chivalrous, Panty Collector" Makino drawled mockingly, although her ire really wasn't directed at Brook, rather what she had to do now. With her eyes still closed, hopped into the air, wobbling a bit as she did, only opening her eyes to stare directly ahead of her and above, trying to ignore the fact that she was standing on the air several hundred feet above the ground. "You know I hate this!"

"No pain no gain," Luffy retorted, shaking his head. "Now come on! I think this might actually work out quite well."

OOOOOOO

Snorting, captain Eustass Kid stared up at the auction house in Grove 1, shaking his head. "You think these fucking slavers have a high opinion of themselves or what?"

"Heh, doesn't seem to be a question, Captain," Killer murmured behind him. "You still want to do this?"

"You've been hearing the same rumors I have. A giant at the least, and a mermaid as a last-minute addition. The mermaid could be a major help going forward," Kid answered, chuckling under his breath. "A local to help us interact with the rest of her folk on Mermaid Island is a fantastic idea, given it's Whitebeard's territory."

Killer looked a bit uncomfortable at the mention of Whitebeard, but nodded, grateful his captain wasn't one of the horny scums that all too often simply saw a mermaid as an exotic sex object rather than an actual person. "Just so you know we don't have all that much belli left."

"Feh, if she's here I might just break this mermaid out regardless. After all, I mean to be the Pirate King, why would the flag of a mere Shichibukai scare me," Kid laughed wildly, before pushing the double doors open stalking forwards like a king not even waiting for Killer to respond to his comment. Inside, he found that he was among the first to arrive, although a goodly chunk of the seats were already taken up by locals.

They all stiffened as the doors opened and turned to look at the newcomers, some with trepidation, others with fear, a few with respect. Seeing this, Kid smiled widely, resting one hand on the pistol at his side. He loved looks like that, they spoke of power, and Eustass always liked being reminded of the fact that he was powerful.

What he did not like was being hailed from one side, a laconic, sardonic, and above all taunting voice saying his name. "Yo, Eustass-ya. So you're here to see this little shindig too?"

Kid turned, glaring at the pirate captain Trafalgar Law, another Supernova. He and Law had spotted one another occasionally over the past days, but hadn't interacted at all, and even if they had, the way the other man had said his name irked Kid immensely. "What about you? Given your reputation for being careful, I thought you'd have left like that ass Apoo, considering Flash Sword Gion is here in the archipelago."

"...I didn't know that," Law admitted, frowning a little, before shrugging his shoulders. "However, while I have added quite a few people to my crew, I still require a special person that I believe will be here today."

Kid frowned, cocking an eyebrow, as his body tensed. "The mermaid?"

Trafalgar shrugged his shoulders, leaning back in his chair and putting his feet up on the chair in front of him. "No. If you want the mermaid, you can have her, Eustass-ya. Although I've never seen the appeal myself."

Law snorted disdaining to rise to the innuendo in the other man's tone and moved to the other side of the main path, sitting across it from his fellow pirate captain. "And the press say I have an ego, at least I didn't mark my hands with 'life' and 'death.' And what is up with that stupid hat?" he muttered under his breath, causing Killer to shake his head, thinking that no one on their crew really had a leg to stand on when it came to commenting on fashion.

"Just remember captain, that Flash Sword might come after us if we're here for too long," Killer said aloud.

"And I will remind you Killer, I'm actually looking forward to fighting the old biddy." Kid chortled loudly. "I wager that, or knocking off this place and taking the mermaid, will get the attention of the powers-that-be. They may even up my bounty again."

Elsewhere on the island, Gion suddenly turned from talking to her first mate, her blade flicking out and slicing a large stone and the tree beyond it into pieces. "For some reason I have a strange desire to kill everyone... just everyone... how odd."

Killer groaned, but said nothing, knowing it was useless and Kid snorted leaning back in his chair. However, as he rested there, he noticed something odd about Trafalgar Law. The other pirate captain did not look as if he'd had an easy time of it lately. Indeed, he looked quite scuffed around the edges, portions of his clothing looked sliced up, and his chest seemed to be covered in wrappings under his shirt. Which was just fascinating to Kid.

Looks like he got into a fight somewhere, maybe with Bonney? She was the only other member of the Supernovas here in Shabondy. Unless he fought with Urouge earlier? Or did he have a run-in with Gion already? And he got away? The minor mystery annoyed Kid, but he wasn't about to ask and hear the other man's annoying voice again. Instead, he just closed his eyes and waited for the event to begin.

OOOOOOO

Sanji stared down at the beaten, bleeding form of Peterman, one foot, raised still from his last kick. "The Human Auction House, Grove 1?" Peterman, the only one of his gang still conscious, nodded his head rapidly and Sanji took a long drag from his cigarette before he nodded. "I suppose I can find it from there. Thanks."

Peterman was about to ask if this meant the terrifying blonde man in the suit would let him go but before he could say more than, “So, -” before Sanji’s foot lashed out again. Peterman was thrown backward in a gout of blood and broken teeth.

After all, he doesn’t need all his teeth, Sanji reflected as he turned and exited Peterman’s hideout, hopping into the air. *I’d stay longer to remove the rest of them one at a time for the effrontery of putting his hands on the wonderful Camie-chan but saving her comes first.*

OOOOOOO

In her office, Tsuru scowled as she stared down the Den Den Mushi. “And you’re certain this man was Black Leg?”

“Positive, miss. My men spotted him personally, it wasn’t one of our spies or agents. And, although this could be wrong, doesn’t it, well, make sense that the Straw Hat survivors would have to stay together until they reached an island at least?”

The man’s voice trailed off, but Tsuru had to admit that he had a point. *And in a way, we could look at this as a good thing.* “Were the two ex-Straw Hat working together?”

“I, um, I don’t think so? They might have been moving to meet up, but Admiral Gion had just forced Pirate Hunter to flee. Perhaps they were meeting up?” The Den Den Mushi’s expression shifted from a somewhat smarmy, or in Tsuru’s mind, moronic expression to a pensive frown. “I’m afraid that until reports come in indicting they have been seen together, we wouldn’t know one way or the other.”

“True,” Tsuru murmured. “Still, the idea that they are there in the archipelago is worrisome in and of itself. That almost certainly means that their navigator survived as well. She’s actually the most dangerous on the strategic level. From the reports about him, the first mate is a blunt object, a very good one, but not enough to be a threat beyond his immediate vicinity. While the cook is dangerously intelligent, he isn’t someone others will rally to. Whereas the Cat Burglar is both bright and dangerously competent...”

She trailed off, and Wilkins quickly stated there was no sign of anyone matching Nami the Cat Burglar’s description. “I can of course put our people on high alert and send word to our clandestine agents but there hasn’t been any sign of her.”

“Damn it, if she joins up with a Yonko, or even one of the other Supernovas...” Shaking her head at that thought, Tsuru continued. “Very well, I will divert help to you all there, either two battleships or someone else.” *Sentomaru reported that one of the Kuma-class Pacifista was ready for a trial run, as was the first of the K9Ms. This should work for that just as well as anything else. That will do for combat power. Espionage, that I will have to think about.* With

that in mind, she picked up another Den Den Mushi and sent off orders to that affect. "Let this be the last time we hear of the Straw Hats being free."

"CRRAAAKKKKK!!!"

Jumping in shock, Tsuru grabbed at her chest and turned to glare at her door, a curse on her lips as she assumed Garp had forgotten his strength again, but that curse died on her lips as she took in the look on Garp's face. *Oh no.*

Looming in the door, the hero of the Marines was not smiling, he wasn't laughing he wasn't even pouting or annoyed. Instead, there was a fierce scowl on his face, his eyes hooded and his hands were clenching at his sides, a bag of his favorite rice crisps dribbling from his hand, bag and crisps alike having been crushed.

Seeing that look, Tsuru knew that this time, Garp had heard. "Garp, I..."

Garp's glare hardened, and he snarled out a single sentence, overriding her. "What happened to the Straw Hats, what happened to my grandson!?"

"Garp... you know that he was an up and coming threat, is it any surprise that..."

Again, she was interrupted as Garp took a step forward. Cracks appeared on the floor from where his foot had set down, as well as all around him, spreading out in every direction, a pressure building up around his body, his Haki given form, almost like Haoshoku but not anywhere as powerful. "A threat!? Since when was Luffy a threat!? I thought we all agreed that leaving him alone..."

"I know he's your grandson Garp but you can't be that blind!" Tsuru interrupted, fed up with the man's attitude. "Straw Hats represented a true and growing danger to world peace. I didn't agree with Akainu's actions, but Straw Hat fighting off a Buster Call, his crew wiping out CP9, that could not be ignored."

"Who made the call? Who decided that?" Garp ground out.

Even in the fact of the Hero of the Marine's uncharacteristic anger, Tsuru was undaunted. "Sengoku gave me the go-ahead and I came up with the plan prior to Akainu's foolishness, and then was ordered to go through with it. The order came from the highest level, Garp, and even if I wanted to, I couldn't have refused. Not that order."

For a moment, Garp stood there, glaring at Tsuru, who just stared back, cool and composed now, although if Tsuru was honest, she didn't feel all that calm. The two of them had always been friendly, well more of an annoying brother and put-upon sister relationship than anything else really. But still, there was something in Garp's eyes that worried her.

Abruptly, Garp turned around, marching back to the door, although thankfully his steps weren't causing any further damage to the building. Tsuru sighed in relief, then needing to calm down a bit, turned her attention back to her paperwork. This went on for all of five minutes before a booming noise interrupted her and Tsuru slumped forward, her head in her hands as a roar reverberated from one end of Marineford to another.

Leaving Tsuru's office, Garp stalked through the hallways, his snarl enough to send any marine, including Coby, his secretary for the day, to run for the hills. The pink-haired youth's face at that point should have made Garp smile, but the sight of the promising young marine just helped to once more twist Garp's mind to Luffy.

Luffy, his grandson, the bright, happy child who had actually enjoyed his training. Garp could remember all too clearly the sight of him rushing around the ship, climbing the rigging like a monkey, ambushing Garp when he stopped in to check on him at Dadan.

Luffy, his grandson. Who, for all he wasn't a marine, had a sense of right and wrong that made Garp prouder of him than he'd ever been of his own son, Dragon. Whose attitude towards life was so much like Garp's own, happy go lucky, taking delight in just living well with his friends but always striving to better himself, to better the world in his own way.

Luffy, his grandson, the baby grown into a man, who Garp had loved. Who he had hoped to see achieve his dream one day, whatever he might have said or done. Wanted to see him continue to grow, maybe to have a wife and child of his own.

Luffy, his grandson. Who was dead now. Slain by Tsuru's plans on the orders of the World Government and the marine high command Garp had sworn to obey. Whoever had actually done the deed, Garp knew who to blame... besides himself, of course.

"One of these days, Gramps, you're going to have to look at the Marines as they really are, rather than like you want them to be. When that happens, I hope you survive the lesson. And remember that I told you so," Luffy had said.

At the time, Garp had refused to acknowledge those words, despite a part of him knowing there was truth to them. *I, I didn't think that it would hurt so much, or that learning it would cost me Luffy.*

With a single finger Garp blasted the reinforced metal door leading to Sengoku's office into pieces. "SENGOKU!!!"

Sengoku had instantly activated his Kenbunshoku when the hit landed on his door and he had dodged or deflected the pieces of shrapnel that resulted. Now he bounced to his feet over his mauled desk, glaring at Garp. "What the fuck Garp?!"

"You!" Garp snarled, moving into the room, his eyes practically wild as he glared at his friend... his former friend. The man who had signed off on the attack on his grandson, one that had succeeded. "You, why!? Why did you agree to have my grandson killed! Why!?"

"Stand down Garp," Sengoku growled, moving forward to shout directly into Garp's face, while he winced internally. *Fuck, I'd hoped that the business with Ace would be done with before he learned about our role in Straw Hat's death.* "This operation was approved by me, and yes, Tsuru planned it as well as she could. A future threats to world peace has been removed. That is what matters."

"What threat?" Garp roared back, the sheer force of noise, causing Sengoku to take a step back, and he realized with a sinking feeling that Garp wasn't going to back down as he had hoped. "My grandson was not a threat to world peace, you idiots," Garp ground out, thrusting a finger into Sengoku's chest so hard that the man stumbled back, causing his eyes to widen slightly. "Not if we had left him alone. His own sense of right and wrong would never have had him attack us like that ass Kid. And not only did you move against him, but you went behind my back to do it!"

Perhaps if Garp had stayed to talk to Tsuru, perhaps if he had demanded answers from her, Tsuru might well have been able to come up with the words to calm him down. Garp was a marine and had been one for decades. He was used to following orders, even a few he didn't like from people he didn't like. But Sengoku was never one to sugarcoat things, and even with Garp, he wasn't willing to take this bit of insubordination lying down.

"By the spirits of the Seven Oceans Garp, Straw Hat stopped a Buster Call! He fought Aokiji to a standstill! He killed a Shichibukai! How could he not be considered a threat, regardless of if he started anything!? And above and beyond that, we had orders! Orders from the highest authority to remove Straw Hat! So that is what we did." Sengoku made an effort to calm down, to keep his voice even as he went on, almost conciliatory. "I know Straw... Luffy was your grandson, but you could not have stopped this. Not after that order came down from on high."

And perhaps if Sengoku had left it there, perhaps Garp might have calmed down. But he didn't. "And you can at least take some solace in that Luffy took both Kuma and Moria down with them. Could you imagine what..."

"I can't imagine anything, because he's dead, my grandson is dead Sengoku!" Garp snarled, interrupting his old friend as his face twisted into a sneer. "After not doing a damn thing to get on our bad side beyond survive Akainu's idiocy, after doing our job for us in Alabasta, after helping to kill an element user we had no idea even existed! If he was a threat to us, to world peace, was because we may need him."

Sengoku threw up his hands. "What do you want me to say, Garp!? What is done is done, even if I wanted to change things I couldn't! You need to let this go or else you'll cross a line you can't retreat from."

"No," Garp growled out, and Sengoku felt something approaching despair as he stared at his friend, seeing hatred in Garp's eyes for the first time as he looked back at the Fleet Admiral. "Luffy always told me that sometime I would have to choose, I would have to choose between what is right, and what is easy, what my honor says I should do or my orders tell me to. Well guess what, Sengoku?"

As he spoke, Garp's skin turned black and as fast as one could blink, a Busoshoku fist crashed into Sengoku's chest with enough force to lift him up off his feet and hurl him through the wall behind him and through several other walls until he crashed into the parade ground outside. This despite Sengoku's attempt to use his own Busoshoku to diffuse the blow.

Marines all over the headquarters stared as the walls shuddered. A few of the oldest among them had flashbacks to fighting Whitebeard while others simply stared, uncomprehending. Those few practicing on the parade ground stared in shock as their supreme commander was flung through a wall to crash with enough force to create a crater in front of them.

Sengoku called upon his double powers hastily, and alarms began to blare as Vice Admiral Garp, hero of the Marines, a living legend, a man that many of them looked up to landed across from him. His voice was a roar, scaring many of the marines around him as in her room, Tsuru realized with a sinking feeling that they had fucked up here. "**Blood really is thicker!**"

OOOOOOO

Kid woke up from his doze as the doors were pushed open and he and the rest of the auction goers already seated within the auction all turned to look. Seeing who was coming through the door everyone there stood up and bowed their heads towards the individuals who had just entered. Even Kid, Killer, Law and the strange polar bear person did so, the pirates suddenly deciding they didn't want to make waves **this** big.

Two Tenryubito floated through on individual floaters made by a Yarukiman resin bubble. They were both just past middle age, a man and a woman, her face covered in a veil, his eyes covered with sunglasses inside the protective dome that every Tenryubito wore. The woman was thin, haughty looking, the man cold and aloof, his face just as thin although his body was heavier looking. They made their way down the central aisle as if they owned the place. Which, if they so choose, they would have.

As it was, Law and Kid were oddly enough in sync with one another as the thought, *Dammit!* went through their minds as they looked at the two Tenryubito.

Yet despite the danger the two nobles represented, as the two of them moved to the side of the first row, which was hastily vacated for them, the Pirates settled back into their seats watching closely, listening intently, grateful for the acoustics of this hall that allowed them to hear what was going on, as the owner of auction house hurried out to the stage, where he bowed profusely to both the Tenryubito. "Forgive me Saint Rosward, I was not informed that you would still be arriving without your son. I was informed he was taken back to your ship in ill health. I hope he is recovering well?"

"My son will arrive shortly. Whatever ailment plagued him earlier today was sufficiently healed to come out for this auction when we were informed that you had acquired a mermaid." The man, Rosward, smiled thinly at the pathetic wretch in front of him. "Was that advertisement mere hyperbole or part, or is this the case?"

"Of course it is the case! I would never impugn the honor of my fine establishment by offering something I didn't actually have," the man answered, bowing even more profoundly. "Nor would I ever try and cheat one such as you, my Lord."

"However," he went on, as the older man huffed in approval, "I, I have to warn you, this is an open auction, as guaranteed by my patron. Even if I wished, I could not simply turn the mermaid over to you or your son when he arrives. You will need to take part at some point."

"It is of no concern. When my son arrives, he will be bidding for this mermaid if he so wishes. For myself, if I see anything of interest, I will join the rabble attempting to pay your price," Rosward waved a hand airily. The idea that he or his son would lose those bids did not enter into his voice or body language at all.

"Thank you profoundly, my Lord," the auctioneer said, bowing. "Should I hold up the proceedings to wait for Saint Charlos to arrive?"

"I doubt there will be a need for that either. He was hurrying here the last time I spoke to him on the snail. Simply go about your business and hold out on the mermaid until last," the woman spoke up for the first time.

"Ah, of course, thank you for your graciousness!" With another obsequious bow, and an offer of refreshments, which was of course declined the auctioneer brushed back behind the curtain, and several moments later, the auction began, just as the doors open again, revealing a swordsman with three swords at his side.

Zoro had seen this building from ways away, and the pirate flag above it. Figuring that any building so important to deserve its own protective flag might make for a good target, he had gone toward it, only to find a large merman chained up outside. At first, he'd offered to free the guy, but had been warned that his collar would explode if tampered with. At that point, Zoro had decided to enter the building.

Looking around Zoro recognized Law from their earlier scrape, and on the other side Killer, the only one of the Supernovas known as a swordsman. He grinned evilly at that before blinking, looking at the front of the auditorium, his brows furrowing as he heard the auctioneer begin his pitch. *Fuck, I'm too late to interrupt it.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, the auction is about to start! I will remind you now that all sales are final and must be paid before you take possession of your purchases and that this Reallocation of Human Resources Department is under the protection of the World Government's and our specific patron," he said, pointing out towards the roof.

This didn't mean anything to Zoro, who hadn't noticed the pirate flag outside the building. He simply stared, then moved over to sit in front of Law, ignoring the looks Killer and Kid were sending his way as he muttered. "So, this is where the slaves are being sold?"

"That's right," Law whispered back "and those two in front with bubbles on their heads, those are Tenryubito. So, I would think it is in your best interest to not cause trouble here, Zoro," Law whispered back, his tone that of someone trying to speak to a particularly dim child.

"I'll be the judge of that," Zoro snorted shaking his head, uncaring of the man's tone, staring at the auctioneer as he mentioned a mermaid. *It can't be... fuck!*

"Hoho, this day just got even more interesting," Eustass Kid murmured, staring at Zoro, Law and then down at the auctioneer. "Now, what would Roronoa Zoro of the defunct Straw Hats be doing here, I wonder?"

OOOOOOO

"Sir! We just got report from one of the marine guards Saint Rosward requested when he arrived in the Archipelago. They report the arrival there of a man matching Roronoa Zoro's description!"

"Where is there?" Gion demanded, turning on her communications officer so fast the man flinched. "Well, spit it out man!"

"The, the Reallocation of Human Resources Department, sir!" the main answered, using the government sanctioned term for such places, knowing he would get in trouble if he didn't.

Gion had no such compunction. "Human Auction House," she snarled, making to spit to one side. "Of course, why wouldn't he?" *Pirates, Tenryubito, what is the difference between them? Only the type of power they wield and the first's connection to the World Government, nothing more. And... oh shit, that means there's a Tenryubito there along with Zoro, a pirate who has lost his crew and maybe any last shits to give with it. FUCKKKK!!!!*

With a snarl, Gion gestured to one side, her first mate came up. "We're making for the Human Auction House! First Officer, I want the troops ready to spread out the instant we get there. You're in charge of their placement. When we arrive, I will go in alone."

I wonder, Zoro, are you so crazy as to strike at one of the Tenryubito?

OOOOOOO

Twelve slaves went through the process of being brought up onto the stage and sold off. Some of them were resigned, some horrified and crying, others furious. Such was the case of a fully grown giant being sold to a local thug of some kind. "I will have my vengeance on all of you! All of you small people, will die by my hand. I will find my son!"

That caused a rustle through the audience, and from where he sat, Zoro heard the woman with the bubble over her head asking the auctioneer, "Ah, is there going to be a younger giant? Giants are far more easily trained at a young age, perhaps I would be interested in purchasing such a one."

Zoro didn't hear the answer instead having turned to look at the doors behind him opened. He was surprised to see Sanji entering, dressed once more in his habitual outfit.

His looks didn't garner any interest from anyone else, although when he slumped into a seat next Zoro, Law, who had been looking somewhat smug, stared at the blonde man, his eyes narrowing in sudden surmise, a surmise quickly vindicated as Zoro whispered out "What the hell are you doing here love cook!"

Cammy-chan is here, and as a white knight, I have to rescue her," Sanji answered, before becoming aware that there were others close enough to overhear them. "What about you? I thought you were going to find some other pirates to battle until you died gloriously or whatever it was."

Zoro rolled his eyes, pointing a finger over his shoulder towards Killer and the other pirates. "I'm here to fight them, and maybe kill a few of these slavers," he said honestly. "Not certain what I'll do about the fishbowl people though. The marines don't fight one-on-one, after all."

This caused several of the locals to flinch, and he smirked at them, a wide toothy expression that caused more than one would-be slaver to pale, hurriedly stand up, and make his or her way towards the door.

Sanji snorted at that, before she said, "I still need to get out of here." He whispered, "Don't cause any trouble until she's secure. I brought around a lot of money, so maybe I can just buy her then free her?"

‘That’s probably the only plan you’ve got if they’ve already put a bomb collar on her,’ Zoro snorted. “Some of the locals were questioning the two different types of collars. The auction house has a limited supply of the things, but they have these collars that explode if they’re tampered with and are permanently shut. The giant’s wearing one. Makes sense a mermaid would be given one too.”

“Well... shit,” Sanji grumbled, watching the stage.

Moments later the auctioneer shouted, “And now, ladies and gentlemen. Now for the prize of prizes, the late entry into today’s auction that all of you were waiting for. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you one of the sirens of the sea, a mermaid!”

The curtains flew back, revealing Camie. She had been put into a large fishbowl, half of it filled with water to allow her to swim around, the better to show off her mermaid qualities so the buyers didn’t think she was just a human woman in a strange suit. Around her neck was a collar, and Sanji’s cursing grew noticeably louder.

In the front row seat, the elderly Rosward sighed. “Well, she is somewhat cute, I suppose, although she certainly isn’t the most entrancing member of her kind I’ve seen. I do not see enough there to wish to aid Charlos in purchasing her.”

“Perhaps not, my love, but her vapid air is a point in her favor when it comes to our son. You know he doesn’t like women who are too broken in before they get to her... And just look at how scared she is already. She will be easily pacified,” his wife said, her voice causing even some of the other slavers to shudder.

“True, yet I would still prefer the boy use his own money, if possible,” Rosward grumbled. “Still, I will put forth a wager. I just hope it does not become too much.”

The betting progressed but for the first time, the Tenryubito took part. This put off about money, two-thirds of the audience for trying, leaving only the most rabid of perverts or the richest of souls (those often went together, alas) from trying to purchase the mermaid, as Camie stared out at them glass cage, tears welling in her eyes.

“Do you think you could cut that collar off?”

“Cut it off, sure, stop it from exploding, no,” Zero answered Sanji’s question. “I’m still willing to try. You’ll have to be ready too, though, ready to pull the collar in a certain direction as I cut it.”

Sanji nodded that, muttering under his breath, just loudly enough for some of the others around them to hear. “I can’t believe I have to work with you like this again!”

“Get over yourself. Love cook,” Zoro snorted. “I’ll help you out this once because we owe Camie, but after that, we’re done. It’ll be up to your skills to get the pair of you out, so you better be ready.”

“You don’t have to tell me to give it my all to rescue a maiden, National Treasure!” Sanji retorted, hopping to his feet.

That the two of them moved towards the front down the main aisle, with Trafalgar and Kid staring after them in surprise and delight. “What is this, what are they doing?” Killer murmured.

“You cannot be serious! I knew Zoro was trouble, but this?” Trafalgar hissed.

“Ahaha, cool, a floor show,” Kid snorted. Not a single pirate made to leave the auction house, instead watching on as events continued below, not even noticing the door opening behind them.

Sanji began to speak as he marched forwards, shouting out, “How dare you! How dare you try to make a slave of such a beautiful creature. I am going to free the beautiful Camie and if any of you get in my way, I will kick you till your parents feel it!”

“Now, see here!” auctioneer shouted back before anyone, even the two Tenryubito, could get a word out. “I maintain a clean establishment. All the slaves here were sold to me fair and square!”

“Even if they were kidnapped off the street, little man?” Zoro said with a growl in his tone. “I wonder what you’d look like with a collar around your neck.”

At that, the man stumbled back a bit but rallied quickly. “Don’t you know whose human auction house this is? It’s not just the world government who you would have to worry about. The Shichibukai, Doflamingo has also guaranteed the safety of this place!”

“What, another one?” Zoro quipped, shaking his head.

“Damn, they are just popping up all over the place,” Sanji added, although unlike Zoro he had some acting ability, so added a sneer and a scowl to his face, staring off as if in memory for a moment before coming back to the here and now. “But unless he’s right here, then we’re going to free Camie whatever you try, so I suggest you stand aside and keep all your teeth.”

This caused the man to blanch, and the two Pirates crossed the intervening distance quickly as the rest of the audience scattered, putting distance between the pirates and themselves.

The guards around the two Tenryubito had watched the duo, while both of them had watched this with amusement as if this was no more than a farce, a play for their benefit that would end as soon as they wished it to. Now Rosward spoke. "Bah. Enough. Guards seize them. If they do not resist, I may let the rest of this rabble live despite not leaping to defend us from these obviously insane fools."

That caused wails of terror from the crowd, and even Kid and Law looked a little worried. Then, Sanji moved. Between one step in the next, he used Soru, flashing into the face of the guards around the two Tenryubito. One kick each was enough to send them flying, and then Sanji was standing in front of the auctioneer, grabbing the man's neck with one hand.

But as he did, a gun barked, and Sanji staggered as the bullet took him in the side of the shoulder, driving him sideways. He turned, glaring towards where the shot had come from, only to see a third Tenryubito had entered the auditorium. "How dare you swine commit violence in the presence of my father and honored mother!?"

"Ah, an excellent shot my son," Rosward announced, before calmly pointing his own small gun at Zoro along with his wife. Their actions were a mix of complete, total arrogance, as if they could not imagine anyone here would truly threaten them, and contempt, knowing that to raise a hand against them was to bring down the ire of a marine Admiral. "In the name of the World Government and the Tenryubito, I sentence you to die."

Zoro redirected both pistol shots with ease, shaking his head, then to the horror of the watchers, he lashed out almost negligently. A single strike from the Shisui was all it took, cutting out across the two Tenryubito. Both man and woman fell, nearly cut in half. Zoro hadn't pulled back his strike all that much, having learned of what the Tenryubito were before this.

When he moved, Sanji was just as ruthless and uncaring of the consequences. A foot caught Charlos in the center of his chest sending him hurtling back into the side of the auditorium with enough force to shatter ribs and create a crater there.

For a brief moment there was silence, then the audience began to scream, and the exodus that had begun when Sanji and Zoro made for the stage was magnified by the rest of the crowd, all of whom raced for the doors in utter terror. Not of the murder in front of them, no. They feared the retaliation that would soon arrive. "RUN!! FLEEE!!!" came the screams, as men and women alike fled for their lives, trampling over one another in their haste.

"You idiots!" Killer shouted, while Law and Kid stayed silent, still watching events in front of them, one calculatingly, the other with a wicked grin on his face. "Do you have any idea what you've done! The Tenryubito are the bedrock of the World Government. When their attacked, the Marines dispatch an Admiral and six battleships to the location. If they're killed, the response is worse!"

Zoro shrugged his shoulders, uncaring, while Sanji snorted, moving over to the bowl containing Camie. "Oy, Zoro cut this."

"Don't give me orders, asshole!" Zoro growled out.

Despite his words, Zoro moved over to the large fishbowl, gesturing Camie to dunk herself entirely into the water. When she did, Wado Ichimonji flashed out in an iai strike, cutting through the fishbowl so cleanly the top of the glass simply slid off to one side instead of shattering.

By this time, the only people in the building were the dead, unconscious, or the other pirates. Zoro glanced their way, but neither twosome, Law was only there with Bepo, much like Kid was there with only Killer, seemed to have any interest in anything but watching what was going on.

That was annoying to Zoro, who well knew that Law could help them. But by the sardonic, amused look on his face, Law had no such interest. *And I will be damned if I ask him for help. He'll either make me beg, or demand something in turn. No chance.* In contrast, Kid looked a little annoyed, but unlike his partner, didn't seem to care about the dead Tenryubito, he was scowling more like someone who had just seen an opportunity go by.

Turning back, he watched as Sanji examined the necklace around Camie, scowling. "Why don't we just destroy the controls?"

"Because if you do, all of them will go off," a calm voice answered him from the back of the stage.

Zoro turned in that direction to see an old man step up onto the stage and instantly his hand dropped to his swords once more. Despite his age and being dressed like a homeless person, he moved like a man half his age, his shoulders were broad and muscled, and while his white hair was shaggy, his goatee was short and well-trimmed. Coupled with these odd dichotomies, Zoro could feel a presence within the man, a presence Zoro had only ever felt from his own captain, Hancock, Oz or Enel.

Nor was he alone in this. Sanji, Law and the others all straightened up, staring at the man, with Law whispering. "Oh my, oh my, who would have thought we would meet a legend here of all places?"

None of the others recognized the man, but could see he was dangerous, while the other prisoners coming out after him didn't seem to have that concern. "Who're you, Gramps?" Zoro growled.

“Ma, I’m just a passing ship coater,” the old man replied with a laugh, before frowning as he looked at the collars on the giant and the mermaid. “But you seem to have a bit of trouble there.”

With that, he crossed the distance to the fishbowl so fast Zoro and Sanji had trouble tracking him. The old man noticed they had and he turned from Camie, smiling at them. “Hoh, you were able to follow my movements? Amazing. I wonder...”

The old man’s eyes suddenly narrowed, and a wave of Haoshoku splashed over the six pirates, avoiding the others still conscious in the room. Behind the stage, Kid and Law both stiffened, but otherwise didn’t react, while Killer stumbled, and Bepo gasped, slumping to one side, knocked out entirely.

For his part, Zoro didn’t react at all beyond glaring even harder at the old man. “What the hell was that for!?”

“Ma, ma, just a little test. Which you passed with flying colors. Well done!” the old man enthused, before turning back to Camie.

Zoro made to draw his sword, but Sanji cut him off. “Enough, Zoro. If he can get this travesty off Camie-chwan’s neck, it doesn’t matter he hit us with his Haoshoku. Although, elder, I would wonder who you are. If you have that power there is no way you’re the nobody your clothing tries to say you are.”

“Ma, the name’s Rayleigh, I doubt you up-and comers know me,” Rayleigh answered with another smile.

Zoro and Sanji stared at one another, then back at him their widening eyes telling him that they did know his name. “Ah, so you have heard of me.”

“From a lot of sources actually,” Sanji grumbled, then bowed slightly from the waist while Zoro stood back with a huff. “But can you actually help us?”

“Hmm... well, we’ll see.” With that, Rayleigh turned back to Camie, placing his hand on the collar once more, ignoring the beeping and Camie’s rapidly widening eyes. He stared at it for several beeps then somehow pulled it off her without any need to cut it or break any segment of it. Then he tossed it into the air, where it exploded a second later. “Mm, that worked.”

Good god, that was just raw speed! Sanji and Zoro thought, for once united in their thinking, with Zoro’s mind going on to analyze what they had just seen as Sanji moved to help Camie out of the fishbowl and onto one of the Tenryubito hover chairs, kicking her corpse off it.

That was almost as fast as Luffy's multi-hit attack or his lighting attacks. And did he somehow infuse Camie's neck with Busoshoku before breaking it? He tears and removes it so quickly it doesn't have time to activate the bomb. I... I don't think even working together the Love Cook and I could have done that so well.

"Well, Zoro, that was an amazing show," Trafalgar said, standing up and clapping his hands together several times. "And Silvers Rayleigh, I never would've anticipated meeting a big shot like you. Meeting you alone has made this day worth all the trouble. Don't worry, Kid, Zoro. I'll handle anything going on outside. You don't have to bother your heads with it at all."

Zoro snorted at that, while Kid reacted in anger. "You asshole, you think I need you to protect me?"

He hopped to his feet and made for the door.

A booming female voice shouted out, "Pirates, come out and surrender. If I have to come in after you, your execution is going to be far more painful than it already is."

At that voice, Zoro also instantly made for the door, shouting out over his shoulder, "Get the prisoners out of here, Sanji. I have a date to get back to."

Sanji's eyes narrowed at that, wondering what the hell the swordsman was calling a 'date,' staring towards the door, then back at Zoro as screams and shouts abounded from outside. "I think you and I have very different definitions of that word, but then again, I really shouldn't be surprised by that given how much you like to fondle those swords of yours."

With the last word given and a parting finger from Zoro, Sanji moved to the stage, looking at Rayleigh thoughtfully before turning to Camie. "Camie, is there a stream past here?"

"Yes, it's where the slaves are brought in. But don't you think the Marines might think about that?"

"If they do, I'll deal with them," the giant said, smacking one hand against his chest as several of the others would be slaves finished climbing up onto his shoulders. "Once we're away from this place, we can't hide out somewhere in the groves. Thank you again, stranger, and you too, old one. Now I can begin my search for my son."

"Well, that's good to--" Sanji began, before the ceiling broke in. A moment later, a redhead crashed down next to Sanji, a kick lashing out that he only barely blocked, followed by a punch that set his head to ringing as he was flung aside. *Oh that little....*

As he had known it would a moment later Luffy's cheerful voice sounded out saying, "Black Leg Sanji of the Straw Hat Pirates, I'm here to take your bounty!"

Grimacing, Sanji pushed himself to his feet, bringing out his jaw, as 'Ranko' looked around, and realized that they didn't really have an audience beyond the slaves, one of whom, the giant was raising his hand to flatten her.

Luffy grimaced, and prepared to retaliate, when Rayleigh began to laugh. "I take it," he said between guffaws as he looked at the redhead and Sanji, "that there is something personal between you two," he asked winking slightly at Luffy.

Staring back Luffy's eyes narrowed as she was reminded of a phrase she'd come up with her old life. Beware old people, they only get that way by outliving their enemies. *This old guy is giving me distinct Gramps vibes.* As an experiment, Luffy let loose a sliver of his Haoshoku towards the man.

Even as a few of the slaves began to shiver from the position on top of the giant's shoulders, the old man laughed, flapping his hands in delight. "Magnificent, amazing control," while everyone else there, stared in confusion at the redhead. "I'd wondered, why the swordsman and Sanji seemed to have no reaction to my abilities, now I know.

"Yeah, well, practice makes perfect," Luffy answered, now very thoroughly spooked. "But who are you?"

"This is Silvers Rayleigh. Silver, this is my ex-girlfriend from back in East Blue," Sanji deadpanned, deciding to make up a story on the spot. "Evidently, she is still somewhat miffed about the way you broke up. No one likes a crazy girlfriend, Ranko."

Luffy huffed. "Oh please, you dumped me for a bimbo who would put out on first date, what do I have to be angry about that? No I'm angry, because you got me drunk tied me to the mast of my ship and let the ship go out on the ocean."

The former slaves murmured amongst themselves, and Camie stared at the two pirates in confusion while Rayleigh silently nodded his head. "Well, far be it for any of us to get between you two. I will be leading these fine gentlemen and this fine lady. You can settle your differences once were gone."

"Fine," Luffy answered, crossing her arms and staring at Sanji belligerently.

Smiling at how well two pirates had been able to come up with the story like that, Rayleigh motioned the prisoners into the back of the warehouse portion of the auction house. "Whoever wins, come find me in a place I think you both know. A drink, and a talk with the winner sounds like a fascinating way to spend a night."

"Ugh, go hit on someone your own age, old man," Luffy snorted, trying to act like she wasn't impressed.

When they were gone, she turned back to Sanji, shaking her head. "So that was the first mate of the Pirate King... in his old age, after not having done much past seventeen years. Meaning he's probably lost a few steps."

"I'm not certain if he's lost anything, but regardless of if he has or not, I wouldn't want to mess with him."

"Really? I would want to. That sounds like fun," Luffy quipped, smirking.

"Yes, well, you're a special type of crazy," Sanji retorted, and Luffy laughed before becoming serious.

"Your joining wasn't a part of the original plan but having both of our stronger fighters nearby and only broken handcuffs away from joining the fight is a very good outcome. But you do remember, don't you, that this portion of the plan entails you being beaten down by me, right?"

Sanji grunted, standing to his full height, raising one leg into a combat stance. "Don't think I'm going to make it easy for you, Captain."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, cookie!" Luffy said in response, charging forward.

OOOOOOO

The two pirate captains were still arguing as they pushed the doors open each of them saying they would be enough for this. This argument ended as Law spotted Gion, and he scowled, taking in the open zone around the auction house. "My word, they do seem to have planned this quite well, haven't they, Eustass-ya?"

"Shut it. If you're suddenly getting cold feet, I'll take Flash Sword, you take the riffraff," Kid snorted, striding forward.

"Ah, the courage, or is naivety, of the young." Gion snorted, being close enough to hear the two of them. Then she grinned like a shark, all teeth and no humor as she stared at him. "Well now, isn't this nice? I come for one set of criminals and Tenryubito murderers, and I find two hanger-on. I don't suppose either of you would like to surrender?"

Kid sneered. "What kind of pirate surrenders!?" With that Killer charged forward as Kid pulled his pistol out, firing as it did.

While somewhat impressed by the pirate's ability to fire from the hip like that over more than fifty meters, Gion still batted the musket ball aside with her sword, and then charged forwards shouting out, "Bloody Cutter!"

The same red-tinted attack that nearly took out Zoro lashed out, twitching around Killer's defenses to crash into his chest, hurling him backwards. And unlike Zoro, Killer didn't have any Busoshoku. He'd been able to dodge enough of it at the last second so that he wasn't bisected, but blood still gushed from his wound, and he gasped, pulling back instantly as the scythe blades in his gauntlets whirled deflecting a follow-on attack even as Gion closed.

Seeing this, Kid grimaced, reaching out with his powers as he charged forward as well. *Damn it, let's see if I can disarm the bitch. If not, the metal of those cannons will have to do as weapons.*

Feeling her sword, being tugged out of her grip by some unseen force, Gion stumbled to a halt, and pulled away from Killer, snarling. "You dare try to take a swordswoman's blade!?" With that she covered Konpira quickly with Busoshoku. This canceled out Kid's magnetism.

But it didn't save the Marines all around the clearing who fired their rifles, or launched cannonballs at the pirates, but in their own way both pirate captains were proof against any kind of long-range assault. Those marines on the left flank shot first only for their shots to run into Law's Expanding Room, and were halted in midair, turned and around and launched back to their owners. And while most of those marines were still out of his Room's range, the momentum of their weapons continued despite being turned around entirely.

While on Kid's side of the battlefield, two of the cannons had moved close enough to fire grapeshot at him and Killer, along with Gion, although given her Busoshoku, that was little threat to her. Yet even these high-speed pellets stopped almost as soon as they left the barrel thanks to Kid's magnetic-based Devil Fruit powers. As they did, Kid flicked his hand, sending those pellets back into the cannoneers, slaying several. At the same time, he shifted his finger around in a circle, launching the cannons and the cannonballs towards Gion who had yet to rush forward.

Gion scoffed, then whirled in place, slicing and dicing everything that came towards her, before bouncing up and off one piece of shrapnel from a cannon as she closed. "Too slow!"

"FINALLY!" Zoro grumbled, stepping outside. "Why the hell that place moved its main doors is beyond me." His grumbling ended however as he saw Gion already dealing with Killer, and he quickly tied his bandana in place before rushing forward.

Blocking the blow intended to finish off Killer, a sneer on his face as he kicked the other pirate aside, adding quite a bit of insult to injury. "I'm so glad I ran into you," he snorted, looking up at Gion. "That guy doesn't seem to have much going for him other than his little spinning sword trick. Pity.

As if you have room to talk coward," Gion snorted, her Busoshoku enhanced foot trying to catch Zoro in the chest. But he danced out of the way, his three swords out and blocking her

attempts to get through his defenses even as she took to the air once more, reminding Zoro heavily of fighting Luffy as she had again before.

“What the, who are you calling a coward!?” Zoro roared, Shisui and Sandai Kitetsu swinging out in two directions battering Gion’s attack back before he twirled bringing Wado Ichimonji to slice at Gion. She got her Busoshoku covered arm up in time, but still stumbled, barely able to bring her sword back on guard to block Zoro’s next flurry of strikes.

Even so she replied to his question. “You ran off, you ass! I’ll applaud the planning but you still ran off. What kind of swordsman is willing to turn his back on the enemy!?”

The words struck harder than Gion’s next strike, and Zoro stumbled, scowling angrily. “It’s not my fault you got lost, or that these groves move around!”

“Do you think I’ll believe that?!” Gion snarled, their swords clanging as they met, moving so fast they only appeared to most of the other people in the area when they connected with one another. “Now you’re lying to cover up your strange strategy? Tell, me, did you always intend to come here and kill Tenryubito to take revenge for your dead captain and crew?”

“Ugh, why in the world would I sully my swords with that filth purposefully? Hell, I would have left them alone this time too if they hadn’t decided to fire at me like morons who didn’t know the danger they were in,” Zoro shot back.

Gion grumbled at that, but said nothing aloud, while inside, she was cursing up a storm. *Davy Jones’ hairy asshole, that actually sounds too damn plausible, fucking Tenryubito. If they had as much common sense as fucking arrogance the world would be a much better place.* Of course, she couldn’t say that out loud, and instead opted to end the banter with a weak, “Still feels more like you planned to run away from the start to me,” as she pressed her assault.

At that point, Zoro took to the air, flipping up and over her next attack, his swords lashing out in downwards with one of his signature attacks. “Otoro!”

She twisted with it, blocking his strikes, then thrusting up with her own assault. “Bursting Thrust!”

Zoro barely blocked it, using the Shisui to redirect it at the last second, shivering at the power of it hitting his arm. Yet he still lashed out with the Wado and the cursed sword at the same time.

There was a booming cacophony as Busoshoku covered blades crashed into Gion’s Busoshoku cover body. And then Gion was thrown back to the ground. She managed to land unhurt though, and slashed at the ground, rising motion. Rising Earth Wave!”

The bits of ground underneath her shot upwards like the previously used canister shell from a cannon but far faster. Each bit of dirt struck with a sonic boom, hurling Zoro away, causing him to cry out as a few got through his Busoshoku.

From the other side of the battlefield Law watched all this, a pensive expression on his face before he turned aside, looking down at where a large merman had been chained to the outside of the building, a feeling of elation going through him. His face and fins on his arms and legs showed his merman heritage the man was massive. Though crouching down, he towered two feet above Law, broad in the chest, with large arms. Swirling black tattoos marked his heavily tanned frame, and although chained out here like a dog, there was a certain amount of intelligence and anger in his gaze.

“Well, now, this is a fortuitous meeting, former pirate captain Jean Bart. I don’t suppose you would be willing to join my crew at this point?”

With that, his sword twitched out, as did his Devil Fruit power. Between one breath and the next, the man’s collar came off with a simple Shambles. A flick of Law’s finger had it rotating in the air above him as Law cut through the chain, leaving enough there for the large man to use them as flails.

The former pirate captain stared at Law, then up at the spinning desk of his former caller, before nodding. “As you have freed me, my joining your crew seems to be an appropriate payment. So long as I remain free, I will serve!”

“Excellent.” Law smiled thinly, chortling inside at how well this day had gone. *First, I find several slaves able to add fighting power to my crew, and that young giant as well, who has already sworn to join us. And now the original slave I hoped to free. I would still have stolen Jean Bart away on my way out of the building but the entertainment factor has also been immense! I just wonder, there’s something off about those former Straw Hats, and I’m not talking about their ability to use Haki, which I have yet to master...*

He shook his head, deciding to set that aside. He did so just in time as a bullet nearly slammed into his head, a hasty use of Shambles redirecting it to the side. Another bullet however didn’t stop, and he grimaced, ducking instead. The bullet struck the building behind him and looking at where it hit, Trafalgar saw that it hadn’t just hit the outers wall of the building, it had gone right through, and his eyes widened. “What in the hell!?”

Two more bullets rang out, as a woman in green charged towards him, while a skeleton with an Afro on his head closed to go sword to sword with Killer, taking advantage of his previous injuries to press him hard. “Trafalgar Law, your bounty is mine!” the green-haired woman yelled as she closed.

The marines fired at him again as well. Their bullets had none of the special properties that a few of the woman's bullets seemed to and Law was able to stop them in place once they entered his Room. "Bepo take her."

With that Bepo, who had been following behind Law, dashed forwards, lashing out with a series of kicks, reminding Makino of Sanji. She, Luffy and Brook had arrived as the two pirate captains came out of the auction house, and instantly moved to engage, with Makino only pausing to shout at a marine officer that they were a team of bounty hunters.

Bart too charged towards the woman, while Law's room reached for the firing marines as he moved towards them around the small battle around the woman.

In response, Gion's second in command, First Officer Stevens, angrily barked orders, moving back over one of the bridges connecting this grove to its nearest neighbor, shouting out, "Spread out, dammit, spread out more! We can't get close to that blasted pirate. Get some range, damn you!"

He then turned, grabbing at one of the other officers. "Daniels, pull out four men, back off and prepare some wooden staves!" The other man gawked, but Stevens growled out, "For Kid damn it! The bastard's Devil Fruit gives him power over metal."

Makino grimaced as she blocked one of the blows from the strange polar bear suit wearing Bepo, nearly stumbling at the strength of it. *He's almost as strong as Frankie!* Obviously, everyone aboard the Straw Hat Vessel had sparred at least once with every other crewmember, and she well knew how to rate her opponents. *But he fights like Sanji, only with actual punches occasionally mixed in.*

Thankfully his speed wasn't as great as even Chopper, and once she was used to his style, Makino dodged around his strikes using Kami-E. Her guns covered with Busoshoku she thrusting out, cracking one pistol's butt into his shoulder and the other's barrel into his stomach.

Bepo stumbled back with a grunt of pain, yet this allowed Bart to punch over him into her, catching Makino by surprise. As she had ended her Kami-E technique to strike back. The blow took her in the shoulder, sending her to the side and one knee. Bepo took advantage, a series of kicks aimed at her downed form that Makino barely blocked, before twisting around him.

At that, Makino launched a strike of her own, which was blocked in turn by his other foot coming up a roundhouse kick, as he seems to hover in midair for a second. But Makino flipped up over this kick then hopped up over a strike from a large merman, her pistols falling from her hands as she pulled two more armed pistols out of her ki space.

Bart's eyes widened in shock and he was unable to dodge the two bullets that smack into his chest, hurling him off of his feet. "GRAAH!!" Neither strike penetrated his skin, however, causing Makino to tsk in annoyance. Then Bepo was in her face again, a series of kicks crashing into her chest and stomach. But Makino had armored herself for just a moment before impact, rolling away and bringing up her pistols into a double pistol whip that caught Bepo's leg when he charged forward into another kick. The strike broke his leg right below the knee, sending him sprawling to the ground, hissing in agony.

That left Bart to face her alone and she pointed her pistols. "I have no quarrel with---"

Fearing something she couldn't see suddenly, Makino suddenly flung herself backward in a series of rolls, pulling Busoshoku around her in a way that she really couldn't do all that often. Makino's weapons were cut in half by something, but that was all.

Seeing this, Law let out his own tsk of irritation, as more musket balls entered his room. Those he used to hammer at the retreating green-haired woman who dodged and ducked around them, her Busoshoku already fading but still using it to bat aside those musket balls that she couldn't dodge.

Still, this is a bit too rich for my blood at present. Unlike Kid, I have no desire to make a negative name for myself with the World Government. With that in mind, he looked over to the left. There bits and pieces of marines were still bouncing around, fused together with their cannons or just lying around on the ground. The marines there had been cut apart by his Shambles early on in the battle. "Bart pick up my friend, it's time we left."

Elsewhere on the battlefield, while Zoro and Gion were slicing and dicing at one another with no care for their surroundings, Brook's found himself hard-pressed, dodging around bits of metal as Kid sent devil fruit attacks his way, although thankfully he was concentrating more on suppressing the marines, clearing out an escape route for him and his first mate. Meanwhile Killer, although wounded, was still very much in play. His spinning blades were a strange matchup for Brook's thrust-based style, and the two were in a standoff.

For his part Killer was in a nigh-killing fury. His wound was not crippling but he could feel his strength ebbing away with his blood. Yet his pride had been pricked something fierce, by how easily Gion had dealt with him and the way Zoro had so arrogantly kicked him away.

He was in no mind to react when Brook raised his free hand to his Afro, pulling away sharply. From within his empty skull, a flash dial went off into Killer's face.

"ARGH!" Killer yelled out in pain, stumbling backwards, both hands going up to his masked face, blinded despite the small holes he used as eyeholes in his mask.

Brooke instantly took advantage, his sword slicing into Killer's chest. The blow stabbed into his side, before Brook pulled his blade out, going for his throat with the next strike.

However, Brook found his sword halted mid thrust, as if it had run into a wall. A moment later it was ripped from his hand by Kid's magnetic powers, until it was twirled around to point directly back at him.

"Damn skeleton, die!" Kid snarled, having turned from where he had finished decimating the Marines on his side of the clearing. A second later, Brook gasped as his own sword was thrust his chest, then out the other side.

Yet the skeleton laughed wildly as he grabbed onto it, holding it against himself. "Alas for you, I have no flesh to stab! Skull Joke!"

A second later, Brook found himself in midair, tossed aside entirely, as Kid grumbled. "Damn weird Devil Fruit."

He then hefted his downed crewmate onto his shoulder and raced away, unwilling to continue the fight here, not with Killer bleeding out on him. *Damn it, I wanted to fight Gion, but not while Killer's just lying nearby bleeding out.*

The marines made to chase him, but Kid was still out into the groves beyond the auction house, racing to a small rowboat they had been using to move around the archipelago. Within minutes he and his wounded crewman were away, although the marines did not give up. Several broke away from the majority of the marines who turned back to tend to their wounded or afflicted, tracking the pair along the riverbank as best they could.

Because the marines knew something Kid didn't. Reinforcements were already on the way. A lot of them. The death of not one, but three Tenryubito was not something the World Government was willing to ignore.

Back in the main battle, Makino had moved to support Brook, glancing occasionally towards the auction house or the battling swordsman. From the auction house sounds of battle could be heard, but that was nothing to the sight of the gashes, smashed bits of ground and harsh blasts of wind coming from the two dueling swordsmen.

At the heart of that conflict, Zoro was beginning to tire. Using Busoshoku across its entire body like this was still not exactly something he enjoyed and he could feel himself losing energy with every strike that got through his defenses. "Dammit! So, this is the strength of a New World veteran?"

He had said this aloud, and Gion snorted. "Born and raised," responding dryly, between strikes. She was now enjoying herself, knowing that her dance partner, so to speak, was beginning to feel it. "Although even there, I think you'd fit in quite well," she let this out in a small compliment, before striking harder, the next blow becoming several blows midair as her sword seemed to multiply. multiplied. "Red Rain!"

Zoro, however, had seen attacks like this before, when sparring with Luffy, and was able to block nearly every blow, his three swords moving at barely half the speed but thanks to having three of them this was enough. Only two blows out of several hundred got through. One just cut his clothing, but the other sliced at Zoro's chest, causing him to stumble. Still, his own strike took Gion high in the chest.

This caused her to stumble back rubbing at the place struck, although not because it actually hurt through her Busoshoku. Instead, a wry twist appeared on her lips as she quipped, "You sir are no gentleman, to strike a lady in a place like that."

"Would you prefer I didn't take you seriously?" Zoro shot back, and Gion snorted, before pushing the advantage again. This time she broke through his defenses in a series of strikes and thrusting for his head.

Zoro ducked under it, but was completely left open, even as he tried desperately to twist Wado Ichimonji into position to block her follow-up strike, it didn't work. The blow took Zoro the side of his collarbone, drawing blood and driving him to the ground, causing him to grimace around Wado's hilt in pain despite his Busoshoku. However, he was completely open to the kick that crashed into his face.

Rolling with it, Zoro then rebounded back towards Gion, lashing out with twin sword strike, his blades pointed slightly upwards like horns. "Sai Kuru!"

But Gion leaped over it, snorting again, something that seemed to be her go-to expression during battle. "You're becoming a little too predictable, Zoro," she intoned before her next blow lashed out, smashing Sandai to the side, before coming back in a quick and economical flick of Gion's wrist, a slash turning to a stab at one instance.

Again, his Busoshoku saved Zoro from being run through, but he grunted under the strike, which rolled him backward, then brought both his swords around another strike, as she tried to close. Gion blocked them, and for a moment, the two battled against one another strength to strength. "You're good," she commented, gritting her teeth, and then, lifting one hand away from her sword hilt for a moment, letting Zoro push her backwards, as her finger and thrust out. "But you're a little too slow to keep up with me. Shigan."

At last, Zoro's Busoshoku failed. He collapsed backwards, groaning as her finger penetrated his shoulder, almost deadening the arm.

Yet even so, Zoro refused to yield. Gone from his mind was the crew's plan, gone from his mind was the understanding of anything beyond this one battle. And he would not relent. He stood up, his swords still covered with Busoshoku even as Busoshoku faded from the rest of his body.

Gion also stood upright, her own sword ready, waiting at her side. For a moment they stared at one another, then at some unspoken signal, they charged towards one another. There was a flash as their blades met, Busoshoku covered blade, slamming into Busoshoku covered blade, willpower, met willpower. A second later, Zoro fell back, his swords smashed out of position, Gion's sword slicing into his chest from waist to shoulder, almost creating an 'X' pattern with the previous wound that he had taken from Mihawk.

A moment later, Zoro stumbled to his knees. Yet even now, his swords were held tightly in his hands and mouth.

Standing over him, Gion pointed her blade's tip at Zoro's forehead. "Even now you won't let go of your swords?"

"What kind of swordsman would I be, if I let go of my blades?" Zoro quipped, staring up at her through a bloodied mouth, which had formed into a grim smile. *Strength, speed, style, endurance, I was overwhelmed. I have so far to go still.*

Gion actually smiled at that, once more reminding Zoro of his meeting with Hawk Eyes. "It was fun," she said, before her blade came around, and the flat of his blade hit the side of his head, Busoshoku still covering it.

The strike completely knocked him unconscious and he slumped to the side. Yet even so, did not relinquish his blades.

"What a stubborn fellow," Gion murmured, grinning cheerfully to herself. *Despite his initial trick, that was extremely fun. Pity he's going to be drawn and quartered after this business with Ace is finished.*

Before Gion's good mood could sour at that a body crashed down beside her. It bounced a few times, before coming to rest, its face bloodied, its legs looking a little twisted, but still relatively in one piece. Gion cocked an eyebrow, then stared up, as a redheaded woman wearing a kind of cowboy attire bounced in the air above her, waving cheerfully, although her words didn't quite match. "Dammit, I wanted both of them. Still, I suppose that is a little too much to ask."

"And who are you supposed to be?" Gion questioned, smirking a bit and waving up at the seemingly friendly young woman, sheathing her blade with her other hand. "And are you with the weird skeleton guy and the green-haired woman?"

"Yep. I'm Ranko, a bounty hunter from East Blue. I've been after this guy," she said kicking Sanji's unconscious form, "since East blue when he made a fool of me there. Mind you, he wasn't exactly alone at that, his whole crew made a fool of me. I didn't like it," she added dryly.

Gion snorted, but continued to smile at the shorter redhead. "Understandable. Still, you'll get the bounty money for Black Leg at least.

"Good. But I'm also going to be coming with you when you take them in."

Gion's eyes narrowed at that. "Why?"

'Ranko' snorted. She felt she had a good idea of Gion's character even in this short exchange, and decided to play her role as bluntly as possible. "The last big bounty I did was Buggy the Clown. I drop him off, get paid and everything. The next thing I know, you marines have somehow screwed up enough to let him out and he slaughters an entire base full of your lot. I'm not exactly making light of your dead or anything, that'd be wrong. But you gotta understand, I don't bring people in just for the bounties, I bring them in so they are out of circulation. If you Marines can't keep them under control, then..."

Gion nodded. "You want to make sure they are locked up in Impel Down?"

"That's right," Ranko replied, looking a little sheepish now. "I might also be looking to join up. In East blue, well... you lot kind of came in only three shapes and sizes. One, the incompetent. Two, the corrupt. Or three, somewhat competent, but with sticks the size of a Sequoia tree up your asses. If I can skip out on 'training'," she said, making quote marks in the air, "and go straight to becoming an officer or something where I'd be able to follow my nose, but still have access to resources, that'd be perfect to me."

Laughing at the younger woman's audacity, Gion shook his head. "Well, far be it for me to turn down someone willing to join the marines. Sure, and your two companions, I presume they will be joining up with us as well?" Ranko nodded and Gion smiled. "Then that's fine by me."

By that point Makino and Brook had reached them and Brook spoke up. "I am sorry that even Killer escaped us, Ranko. We tried our best to hold the trio of other bounties here until you or this fine lady could finish with your own opponents, but their Devil Fruits were too hard for us to overcome."

At that, Brook set aside his seriousness as he looked Gion, straightening his shoulders and his jacket before bowing. "Dear lady, might I trouble you to let me see your panties?"

"Perverted skeleton!" Gion snapped, whipping out her sword still sheathed thankfully, and thumping Brook to the ground with a blow to the side of his head.

She then looked over at Makino who had come up with Brook and back to Ranko, but both of them simply shrugged. "Trust me, I've been trying to break that habit ever since I rescued him, his name's Jack, Skeleton Jack, and apparently it's a Devil Fruit of some kind."

Gion snickered. "The fact that he's a skeleton, or the fact that he keeps on asking about panties?"

Both women laughed at that, while on the ground, Brook murmured, "So harsh?"

"So, Jack, Ranko, and you..." Gion paused, looking over at Makino.

"Elizabeth," Makino supplied. "We're all bounty hunters from East Blue, as you might have heard already from our friend and leader here."

"You came all this way to follow the Straw Hat's bounties?"

"Not just that, although we came from the same ocean, so we had crossed their bow before. They left our ship adrift, rudderless, right outside of Logue Town. We basically ended up following the officer there, the one with the stick up his ass, Smoker? Into the Grand Line before we turned onto another route at the lighthouse there."

"I see, though, so long as you all are willing to sign up later for the Marines. You can wait until you hand Sanji over to the guards to get your money." Gion let her teeth show for a moment in a grin. "It's not my money after all."

As they moved through the groves, Elizabeth made a point of talking to both Gion and her officers, while after making his acquaintance with Gion in his own fashion, Brook tended to stay with the wounded, helping them along as best he could, fighting the urge to play music to liven up their spirits. Despite his looks being entirely different, Makino had vetoed that idea as it might link back to his still extant bounty poster as one of the Rumber Pirates.

'Elizabeth' and Gion actually got along quite well, with Elizabeth admitting that she had worked as a waitress at one point, been groped once too often, and taken it out on the pirate captain who'd done it. He and his crew came back to ransack the town, only to get his butt kicked by the combination of a visiting Ranko and Elizabeth. It was an excellent story, if one that was made of whole cloth, and Gion lapped it up. As they went, though, Ranko kept quiet, scanning the tree line as they went, ostensibly on the lookout for one of the other pirate crews.

Really, Luffy was thinking that this had gone just a little too well, and was very, very worried that the shooter was going to tromp on people.

Despite that concern, however, it got back to the marine base quickly enough. There, Luffy watched with a bit of trepidation as Gion talked quietly to the local commodore. She saw the man wince a bit, and Gion snarling. But then two of them exchanged salutes, the local man's noticeably less crisp and far more uncertain, as Gion turned away, making her way towards the ship.

Without having taking an Eternal Pose from the man.

That had been the one holding the plan they'd come up with. If Gion's ship needed an Eternal Pose to get to Enies Lobby, that would have sunk their entire plan from the get-go, and they would have been forced to go with a full-on assault of Enies Lobby to open the Gate of Justice. Thankfully, it seemed as if her ship already had one.

What wasn't a good sign though was the sheer number of other ships Luffy could see. Several ships were pulled up to the base's docks, while others were out at sea. All those Luffy could see were marked with the World Government flag rather than the Marine flag, but that wasn't any comfort. *Fuck, I hope that Franky and the rest can convince Rayleigh, hah, a simply Bubble Coating expert, oy, to finish the ship's coating as fast as possible. With this much heat coming down, there's no way we can keep Hancock and her crew being here a secret for long.*

As Gion finished with the local marine officer, Luffy moved over to talk to her, gesturing at the docked ships and the number of WeeGee troopers moving off into the archipelago. "What's all this then?"

Gion shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, I certainly didn't ask for help. I thought the fighting would be over by the time any got here and I was right too." Seeing one large man appear from one of the ships, she smirked, and shouted out, "Oy, Sammy, what's going on here?"

The so-addressed 'Sammy' turned, twitching lightly. "You know I don't like that nickname!" he shouted out, growling the words. "We got reports that you are facing one, maybe even two of the former Straw Hat Pirates, and Staff Officer Tsuru ordered me and two of my special companions here."

The man was large, but with a stocky build reminding Luffy of a sumo wrestler from his past life. A large scar started over his left eye going down to the left corner of his mouth. His outfit was just bizarre though, a brown bib with the word "heaven" on the front, and a large red and white Yokozuna outfit. Bandages were wrapped around his right fist and elbows and he had a tattoo on his left shoulder. On his back was a huge, two-edged axe, as tall as himself, and just as large.

All in all, Luffy could tell that this guy was strong, possibly a New World veteran of some kind.

She watched as the large man gestured out into the archipelago, where beams of light could be seen crashing down into places. "As you can see, there are at work already."

Luffy stared in that direction, wondering what companions this guy was talking about. But he wasn't tempted to use Kenbunshoku to find out just yet. He and Hancock had talked about it, and Hancock had posited that at the highest level of Kenbunshoku you could actually feel other users make use of it. So, since he'd never seen this guy before or heard about him, Luffy was going to err on the side of caution, now that they had their objective so close.

Well, in terms of the first stage anyway, she thought with a rueful chuckle.

“Well, I suppose you can go after Law and Kid, maybe the other supernovas you might be around here. The Straw Hats, though, they’ve been taking care of already, Gion said, gesturing to her ship. “I took care of Zoro, and this young lady,” she gestured to ‘Ranko,’ “took care of Sanji. They’re both still out of it, but given what we know, maybe their navigator could be around the place? Bringing the Cat Burglar in would be a major find.”

Sammy nodded at that and then looked down at Ranko both figuratively and metaphorically, his scarred face twitching into a small sneer, one eyebrow rising. “And you are?”

“Bounty Hunter Ranko,” Luffy answered with a shrug. “And those two are my partners, Skeleton Jack, and Elizabeth.”

“You expect me to believe that a no-name bounty Hunter took out Black Leg Sanji?” the man asked, deliberately goading Ranko.

Luffy looked over at Gion, waving a hand towards the guy. “Can I hit him now?”

“Sure,” Gion shrugged, smirking.

‘Ranko’ disappeared suddenly, darting forwards faster than most there were able to follow. Sammy wasn’t most people, and he brought down his axe to block her blow, a smirk on his face. Which disappeared very promptly as there was a sound like someone tapdancing really, really fast, and then his axe shattered. “Modified Tekkai, bitch!”

Ranko’s use of that move, startled him, and he stumbled away. “Wh, what!?”

“You use Tekkai in only one arm to harden your strikes, well done,” Gion mused. *And that’s a natural step up to Haki use too. These three are a great find.* She slapped a hand onto Ranko’s shoulder, smirking at Sammy. “So, what do you think about my future officer, huh, Sammy?”

“Damn it, it’s Sentomaru!” Sentomaru growled, before shaking his head. “She’s certainly tough, I suppose. Maybe she really did take out Black Leg.”

Internally Luffy winced at the friendly way Gion was talking to her, realizing now with quite a bit of painful irony that she was now in the position that Hina had been on, the marine captain’s words coming back to Luffy now. That getting to know your opponents was oftentimes not a very good idea. It would make betraying them later all the harder. *This is all to get Ace free, remember that Luffy.*

“How many of the Rokushiki do you know?”

"Everything but Shigan, I know its name, but that's it," Luffy answered promptly. "I saw them in use, and I kind of figured them out from there."

"Kind of figured them out? That's amazing," the sumo looking guy said, shaking his head. "My name is Sentomaru, do not call me Sammy if you value your ability to eat solid foods."

Ranko snorted at that, but nodded, looking up at Gion. "Can we get the prisoners on your ship now? The more time they're out here, the more I think that you guys are going to screw up somehow."

She said it in a joking tone, but Sammy and more than a few of the government scowled. Gion didn't, instead laughing and gesturing the trio on, along with her own people who still surrounded the two prisoners. She stopped to talk to Sammy, one eyebrow perking upward.

He looked down at her then away, coughing lightly, a blush on his face. "What?"

"And where were your eyes just now, young man?" Gion teased, causing Sammy's blush to deepen, as while boarding the ship, Luffy shivered, feeling suddenly a little bit sick.

Oh no, that was a number thirteen shiver. *I've got a secret admirer shiver. Fuck my life!*

"Er, I d, don't know what you're talking about. "Um, do you mind if I came with you? Just to guard the prisoners more tightly, of course. The Straw Hats are a tricky bunch."

Just to guard the prisoners, huh, sure," Gion snickered. "I wouldn't recommend it. That girl is definitely giving off 'girl's girl' kind of vibe to me."

Sammy winced a bit, before rallying. "You never know, your women's intuition could be wrong. She could be into big-boned people like myself."

Gion laughed, before shaking her head in the negative. "No. Besides with you gone, who can command the two Pacifista? And what model are they?"

"Actually, I brought along one of each. The world government wants to keep knowledge of the original's...passing to themselves. In both cases."

Gion grimaced at that, knowing that Doberman's higher brain functions had not survived the process to try and turn him into a Pacifista. Models based on him had still been made though. Then she looked around, and her eyes narrowed. "And now you're going to tell me why I see only World Government personnel here, and not even any vice admirals."

Sentomaru sighed deeply, then leaned down and whispered into her ear, telling Gion about Garp turning on the marines.

Gion slumped, shaking her head in shock. "I, I don't... he took it that badly?"

"Yeah. The whole of Marineford is trashed, Sengoku is in the hospital, and so are Akainu and Aokiji, although they should be fine in a few days. The only one who isn't is Uncle Kizaru, but he needs to be there to try and control the narrative. Garp... he didn't just start smashing stuff. He shouted out a lot of secrets, and, well... he needed to be transported to Impel Down right away." Sentomaru grimaced. "It's not going very well."

"Fuckkk...." Gion scowled, shaking her head, while resolutely not asking what kind of secrets Garp might be sharing, or what those secrets would do for her own loyalty to the World Government. That way lies madness. "One hit after another. I suppose that the World Government will need to find some other means to bulk up our combat power again, but damn, the hit to morale is going to be severe."

"Right, so I suggest that you finish up quick and head to Marineford as soon as possible."

Gion nodded, then gestured him off shouting a good luck as she made for her ship. Sentomaru watched her go, before turning and racing off into the Archipelago, eager to bring more pirates to justice.

On the ship, Luffy and the others had been assigned quarters. Brook had been assigned to share a room with the first mate, while 'Ranko' and 'Elizabeth' were given a spare stateroom. They made themselves comfortable, breathing out sighs of relief. The first part of their plan was finished. Now all they had to do was continue to act their roles, and hope the rest of the crew would be able to do their part just as well...

End Chapter