

Ain't Oda or Takahashi.

Hallelujah, Stallion of the Line finally won in the small story poll! It took first thanks to my patty r ons since it only brought in 265 votes here, but it had a total of 1,161 thanks to them. FILFy was second of the two small stories that one in the small story poll with 988 votes, 523 votes from fanfic.

Thanks go to Hiryo for helping me get the names and the flow to go the way I want it to and to Michael for his small mistake editing work.

Chapter 15: Learning to Fly

At first the majority of the crew could only stare down at the Log Pose on Nami's wrist in shock. The first to break out of his paralysis Luffy leaped up quickly towards the tiller, staring at the Log Pose that was permanently set there, and shook his head. "This one's pointing up too! What the heck is going on?"

The only one who wasn't staring down at the Log Pose at the moment was Robin, who was up in the crow's nest on lookout. At their words she too looked upwards and so was the first to see that the sky was about to fall on them, if in a very limited fashion. "Look out!" she shouted. "Large ship incoming!"

At first they all looked around them, and she realized that she needed to be of the more specific as the shadow of the ship, a large galleon of some kind, started to occlude the sun above them. "I mean directly above us!"

Luffy and the others looked up at that, and Luffy was thankful to note that the ship falling on them wasn't actually directly above them, but rather it was to the port side. A smaller ship might well have been missed entirely, given the fact they were still moving, but the Resolve was too large for that, and there wasn't enough wind to push them out of the way in that way.

"Sanji, Zoro, with me! Chopper, protect the crow's nest! Makino, Nami inside!" Luffy knew that Robin couldn't get down and into the ship to safety in time, and Chopper had become an expert at using Guard Point during the fight against the Marines. This would be relatively simple in comparison. While Makino could use Tekkai, there was no need for her to do so just now, while Nami was entirely without a defensive technique just yet.

Robin ducked down as Chopper was hurled upwards towards the crow's nest by Zoro. He grabbed onto the side of the small nest, flipped himself up and over, and then bit down one

of his rumble balls shouting, “Rumble! Guard Point!” Then Robin's world was obstructed by a large, fluffy mass, and she chuckled, patting it companionably for a moment. “Thank you, Doctor-san,” she said sweetly, causing Chopper to blush slightly, though she couldn't see it from her position.

Thankfully, he didn't start dancing, as the large ship above them completed its fall towards them. Zoro roared out his long-range attack, which sliced the ship—which was already badly damaged—in two. Luffy quickly smashed several bits of the ship to one side as Sanji kicked at some other, equally large bits of debris.

But this left a lot of debris to still fall, peppering the deck and shredding the sails to pieces. The trio couldn't be everywhere at once, so the three men had to concentrate on the larger portions, with Zoro slicing them into smaller bits or smashing them away with the flat of his blade, and Sanji and Luffy smacking the bits and pieces away.

Down below, Makino tackled Nami out of the way of one larger than normal splinter, around the side of her forearm, which had shattered on the main deck where they had all been standing. An instant later she rolled and hurled both of them through the doorway and into what had once been the captain's quarters but had since been changed into the crew's gathering place and cafeteria.

Eventually the odd assault ended, and Luffy landed next to Chopper, patting him on his furry hide with one hand as he looked around then again. “Looks to be all clear!” he shouted, and Chopper swiftly changed back into his normal body, falling down to land next to Robin in the crow's nest.

She stood up fully once more and nodded to them both thankfully. While she would have been able to protect him herself from most of the smaller bits and pieces with her Hana-Hana Fruit, it would've hurt tremendously unless she was able to actually grab the bits and toss them away. That was one problem with her powers and one that made her eager to learn Haki: some of the pain that her conjured body parts took was transmitted back to her body, if in a somewhat lessened form.

Makino and Nami came out at that point, only for Nami to scream in fright from a skeleton that had fallen through the defense to land and subsequently break apart on the deck. Robin noticed this too, then stared thoughtfully out at the remains of the ship, which was settling onto the ocean waves, slowly sinking as she watched.

Before she could say anything, though, Luffy turned to Sanji. “Sanji, hop on over there. See if you can find anything that can tell us where that ship came from and why the heck there

aren't any people on it." Luffy had been on the lookout for people among the falling bits of debris and hadn't seen anyone alive, though there had been a few skeletons.

Sanji nodded, saluted mockingly, and leaped into the air, using his mastery of Geppo to move over to the sinking ship as they had all been doing during the defense.

As he did, Luffy turned back to the others. "Zoro, you're with me. Make sure the ship isn't damaged and then get the replacement sails up."

"I'll do that," Makino said, standing up right from where she, too, had flinched backward into the ship's mess at the sight of the skeleton. "But someone needs to clean the deck!"

"Not just yet, if you please," Robin said, climbing down from the crow's nest with Chopper following her. She took one last glance at what must've been the prow of the vessel, staring at it and committing its features to memory before reaching the deck. There she ducked inside, past the two other girls, to pull out a book from one of her numerous bookcases, coming back and setting it on the ground along with a small bag while her quick, nimble fingers started to piece together the skeleton. "Chopper, if you could help me here, please?"

Chopper nodded, though he looked a little freaked out, as did Nami, which the orange-haired woman gave voice to. "That is nasty, Robin!"

"I've seen worse," Makino said, moving past the thing now and moving to furl the remaining sails and drop the anchor, pulling them to a halt. The sea was relatively calm today, and they had already been slowing the ship after Nami's shocked shouting earlier.

Thankfully for the crew of the Resolve, it wasn't very damaged. The deck had been holed in a few places from bits of metal falling, but nothing large. Two of the starboard side's cannon apertures had lost their covers and a piece of the banister had shattered, but the main damage had been to the sails. Luckily, thanks to their fight against the Hawkins Pirates, they'd picked up several sets of sails in recompense for their help. Once the two of them had finished moving around the ship and made certain there was no damage under the water line, Luffy and Zoro helped Makino pull off the damaged sails and replace them, which took them about twenty minutes or so longer than the inspection had.

By the time they were done the skeleton had been put together, and Sanji was on his way back, drenched to the bone and having had nearly been caught in an enclosed room when the wreckage sank beneath the waves. He waited nearby, smiling thankfully for the large towel

Makino had given him and waiting for Robin and Chopper to speak first before going into his own findings.

"The man was in his mid-forties, healthy enough judging by his bones, at the least, and without any injury to his chest or skull that would indicate a violent death," Robin said, looking at the skeleton thoughtfully. "He was laid out, I believe, a very long time ago, since his skin and flesh desiccated off him naturally. I also have here pieces of what appear to be a casket as well. The most interesting point is this," she said, holding up the skeleton's skull and pointing to a large hole in the back. "This is not a wound from battle; the edges are too smooth and healed over for that. Instead it looks to be some kind of medical treatment, correct?"

Chopper nodded authoritatively. "Robin's right. That is a mark from a very old method to reduce swelling in the brain."

"That and the fact that its teeth are so well preserved." Robin actually picked at one of the teeth with a small instrument, coming away with a black looking substance. "Tar on the teeth, placed there after death. That and the practice that Chopper spoke of tell me a time as well as the ocean where it his ship originated. South Blue, I believe." With that she set the skeleton down and began to flip through her book, then nodded. "That was the ship the St. Briss, lost over two hundred years ago from the Kingdom of Breeze," she said excitedly. She turned to look at Sanji. "Though where it came from is still a mystery, of course."

Sanji nodded, holding out a map. "Well, I realize that we should all be sort of immune to surprises by this point in the Grand Line, but prepare to be amazed, ladies," he said, ignoring the men as he sometimes did, holding out the map in both hands towards Nami. "Nami-swan, is this a hoax or a real map?"

Nami marched over and stared at the map in his hands, eagerly tsking from time to time as she looked at it thoughtfully before shaking her head in astonishment. "It looks real, but...Sky Island?"

All of them crowded around to look at the map, which indeed had the header of Sky Island. The map looked like a fanciful one in many places, which was why Nami had been tsking in annoyance. But it had all the markings of a real map; it was aged appropriately like a parchment map that had been well cared for for a long time. It had the underlying marks of a sextant and other navigational and mapping devices, and it had a few places marked on the interior of the island as well. It wasn't a good map from Nami's perspective, but it would've passed muster for most.

"I still don't believe it, though," Nami said, staring upwards now. "Sky Island? How can that even be possible!?"

"You are asking the wrong question, Navigator-san," Robin said shaking her head. She pointed first to the Log Pose on Nami's wrist, then to the other kept up by the tiller, shaking her head with a faint smile. "Those are still pointing upwards, correct?" When Nami nodded reluctantly, Robin went on. "In that case, Sky Island must be real, and our Log Pose has locked onto it. Logic on the Grand Line is different from anywhere else. Here, the only logic that truly exists is simple: believe in your Log Pose and follow it. If you do not, even the greatest of navigators will be lost on this ocean. The Log Pose is the only way through the Grand Line."

Makino nodded too. "That's what Shanks-aho always said, anyway. Though...." She frowned. "The asshole might once have mentioned Sky Island, but he had been there when he was very young I think."

"Odd to think of Shanks as young," Luffy said staring upward in thought. "I agree with Robin. If the Log Pose is pointing in that direction, there's got to be something up there."

"Do you think you can fly us up, then?" Nami asked sarcastically. "Ship and all? Because I don't see any way to get up there!"

"That is indeed a question. I could use Geppo to get quite a ways up there, that's true, but the air would eventually get too thin, and that would affect my ability to move around, let alone carry other people," Luffy said, taking Nami's gibe seriously. "But there's no way for me to get the ship up there, even with Zoro and Sanji's help."

"It disturbs me that you even thought of trying," Nami said before looking over at Sanji, while Makino seemed shiver at the very idea of being that high up in the air. "How much of the ship did you explore?"

"Half of it had already sunk after Zoro cut it in half," Sanji reported, somehow having dried his hair and coifed it over his always hidden eye before anyone else could see it, something that Luffy and Chopper, at the very least, were frowning at in confusion. "The forward half remained out of the water for a bit, but I didn't find anything beyond that map in the navigator's quarters before it was underwater. And even then I had to smash my way out."

Luffy looked around at the others. "Do you think that ship could have more clues?"

"Possibly," Robin said with Nami and Makino nodding agreement, while Zoro and Chopper simply shrugged.

"All right, then I think it's time to break out the stuff we took from the purple mist and those Wetton pirates. Maybe we can create some kind of dive suit to go after the ship. I can hold my breath for a while, even deal with the depth pressure. But I couldn't see down there,

and I'll need some kind of light. Plus, I think I'd like more eyes on this kind of search than just mine. Sanji, let's see what we can come up with."

Sanji had proven to actually be quite good at sewing, though he wasn't as good as Zoro was at woodwork or general construction martial arts.

While Nami and Chopper continued the cleanup, Zoro took up position up in the crow's nest, and Sanji and Luffy brought out the stuff, including one of the suits from the Wetton pirates. In this case, it was the one with the flamethrower. They also took the ragged remains of one of the sails, from which Sanji and Makino began to create a suit to cover one of them from head to toe. Luffy was interested to see if maybe doing that and having multiple layers between him and the water would let him stay afloat, but he doubted it. If any part of him got even damp, he figured the curse would activate.

Above them Zoro was on the lookout for trouble. After all, this was the Grand Line, and, as confident in themselves as most of the Straw Hats were, they knew not to take this sea for granted. This was how he spotted a ship coming over the horizon, moving in their direction relatively quickly. "Captain, one ship inbound, and...it looks odd."

Makino took a moment from her work, as did Luffy, to look up at that while the others paused in their own activities. "Odd how? I mean, this is the Grand Line," Luffy said.

"Yeah, and anywhere else this ship would probably be called freakishly ugly. Here it's just odd. It has a giant monkey statue on the prow and looks like someone tried to make a jungle fever kind of restaurant into a ship."

"Is it actually a restaurant, or is that just the best example your feeble mind could come up with, national treasure," Sanji asked, looking up in interest.

"You come up here and look yourself, love cook! See if you can figure out a better way to describe it!" Zoro shouted.

Soon all of them were up in the rigging, hanging there as they stared at the oncoming ship. "That is a giant monkey on the prow," Luffy said in a somewhat stunned voice. "It looks like one of those little animals that you see occasionally trained to use cymbals and other things to get people interested in a circus or something."

Over the sound of the waves, they could also start to make out the sound of some kind of chant. "Salvage, salvage, salvage."

"That is an abomination!" Makino muttered, shaking her head and staring at the ship. The others looked at her in surprise, and she scowled. "I became good at costumes because I

was initially interested in fashion. Fashion is not just about what you wear, though; it is about architecture, art, and pairing utility and good looks together. That ship is simply ugly!”

“And heavy in the water forward as well,” Nami muttered, staring at it thoughtfully. “In fact, it’s wallowing so much in the water, I have to wonder what that statue is actually made of.”

The ship passed through cannon range quickly despite its ungainly design, coming alongside the Resolve slowly. At that point, a large group of crewmen all wearing the same kind of outfit appeared along its side to stare down at the crew of the smaller ship. “Captain!” shouted one of them, grinning down at the other pirates and fingering his cutlass. “We’ve got a ship here stopped and looking to be busy with something!”

“What!?” shouted a bellowing sort of voice, and suddenly there was a monkey standing on the monkey statue’s head. He was large, a little taller than Luffy and Zoro or Sanji, but with far broader shoulders, wearing what looked like a suspenders and T-shirt combination, which made Makino gag, and Nami patted her on the shoulder consolingly.

Of course, most of them didn’t really care what he was wearing. They cared about the fact that he was a monkey. “A monkey pirate?” Zoro muttered.

“A monkey pirate **captain**,” Luffy said with a laugh, wagging one finger admonishingly at Zoro. “That’s an important bit, right there.”

“But he’s still a monkey,” Sanji said, puffing on his cigarette thoughtfully as he stared at the odd person hanging there in the rigging.

“Perhaps he ate the Monkey-Monkey fruit and this is his Devil Fruit form?” Chopper said helpfully from where he stood in the crow’s nest with Zoro.

The man had heard all this, and seemed pleased, rubbing one hand down his face and smiling brightly at them. “Really, you think I look that much like a monkey?”

“So much so that I think your father and mother probably conceived you in a tree,” Luffy said with a laugh.

“Aww, that’s so nice. You are good guys!” the man said.

Luffy simply grinned. *God, I love the Grand Line! So much random shit, so much adventure!*

“But setting that aside,” the man said seriously, “I have to ask if you’re here to salvage anything. This is my, Masira-sama’s, territory! Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

"Can't say I have, sorry," Luffy said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"That's impossible! We're famous in this area for our salvage operations and for patrolling the sea too! In fact...." Masira looks to one side and smirked in what he might have felt was a conspiratorial manner. "In fact, there's a rumor going on that I am being considered for Shichibukai!"

"Your own crew wouldn't have started that rumor, would they?" Luffy said, to which Masira laughed.

"Still, are you here to salvage something? If you are, we're going to have to fight," the man said regretfully.

Luffy looked around, and his crew all shrugged. "A ship just tried to fall on us from on high. We figured, since it nearly destroyed us, anything on it would belong to us. But we're not interested in gold or anything else, just information about where it came from. Maybe we can make a deal."

Nami was about to scream at Luffy about how, of course, they were interested in treasure, when Zoro quickly clamped his hand over her mouth. She growled, pushing it away just enough to start to bite down on it, and Zoro hissed, pulling his hand away and shaking it out, glaring at her as she glared back while the both of them continued to hang there in the sails.

"Information or not, this is my territory!" Masira shouted, though at first he had looked amazed, then eager, and now very combative. "If you want anything, you'll have to pay for it."

"That ship nearly sunk mine!" Luffy said, now starting to become more serious himself. "I say anything that's on it belongs to us."

"You hear that, men!" Masira shouted. "Looks as if these guys want to fight! Let's get them!" he shouted, leaping over the side.

But he was met in midair by Sanji. The fighting chef kicked out hard, catching Masira in the center of his chest and hurling him out over his own ship to crash into the water beyond, nearly out of sight. Before the startled and now starting to get scared pirate crew could respond to that surprise, Luffy and Zoro had leaped aboard, attacking them brutally. But they didn't kill any of them; they simply knocked them out, tossing them this way and that like so many nine pins.

When they were done, Luffy looked around, smirking a little. "Well, that worked out," he said to Sanji, who landed next to him.

He looked at his captain quizzically, and Luffy went on. "These guys were saying something about salvaging. That must mean they have the appropriate equipment, right? Let's look around for it."

Soon enough they found both diving suits and an apparatus situated in the Masira statue that would pump air down to them. Nodding at that, Luffy decided to take Sanji down with him—Sanji was a better swimmer than Zoro, if only by the slimmest of margins—as well as Robin. Inside the suit she would be able to be underwater without losing her ability to use her powers or, in fact, move, since Devil Fruit users couldn't move once dunked in water, entering something like a comatose state.

As they all pulled on the suits, Luffy asked, "That reminds me of a question I've been meaning to ask you: how do you and Chopper actually shower? I mean, if Devil Fruit users all lose power their powers when touched by water, then...."

"Chopper, I believe, simply scrubs himself down with soap then goes racing through the showers, treating it like a game. For my part, I do it in stages, though I would prefer to have a bath rather than a shower. In a bath I could dump my entire body much more easily while still retaining a small line with which I would be able to pull myself out." Robin replied to the odd question seriously, finishing pulling her suit up to her neck. "After all, it isn't our entire body that becomes immobile, just the bits that are in the water."

Luffy paused as he was about to pull on the glass helmet of the suit, staring ahead of himself thoughtfully as Sanji did the same. Both of them were thinking much the same thing for a moment: the idea of Robin naked and in a bathtub. But Luffy broke out of it and moved over to slap Sanji on his shoulder. "Enough of that," he muttered, while Robin giggled, knowing exactly what the two had been thinking at that moment.

The three of them swam down into the water slowly thanks to Robin not being the best swimmer, down towards where the falling ship had gone. At one point a large fish flashed towards them through the water, its mouth open, but Luffy shook his head and simply glared at it, his suit going black for a moment, or rather, her suit. While these suits gave them air, they were still damp, and that had been enough to activate her curse. Looking scared, the fish quickly swam off in the opposite direction.

Robin, however, was slowly becoming more and more out of it thanks to that same dampness. Seeing this, Luffy moved towards her, putting her arms around the other woman, their chests pressing together as Luffy pushed her helmet against Robin's. "I'm going to tug on your line and send you back to the surface. This isn't working for you, obviously. But put some eyes and maybe a mouth and ear in my helmet before you go. That way you can direct us."

Robin nodded weakly, her eyes barely open. Even through the merely damp clothing, the touch of the ocean all around her was getting to the Devil Fruit user. Indeed, she was barely able to activate her power enough to do as Luffy requested, then do the same with Sanji, who was treading water nearby. "Thank you, Luffy. I'll see you both when you get back," Robin said through the mouths she had created on the interiors of Luffy and Sanji's helmets.

"You're welcome." Luffy replied even as she backed away from Robin. A second later Luffy tugged on Robin's rope, and she watched as Robin was hauled upwards quickly. Chopper and Zoro were on the lines up there as well as the bellows keeping them supplied with air, while Makino and Nami stood guard over the prisoners and searched their ship, respectively.

As she was tugged to the surface, Robin went on speaking, her voice low and her words nearly slurring under the effect of the ocean soaking through her clothing. "I have four eyes looking behind you both and to either side as well as one mouth and one ear. I'll be able to direct you to anything that catches my interest that way. I'm sorry I wasn't more help."

"It's fine. It was an experiment, and it failed," Luffy said, now swimming back down with Sanji.

The two explorers soon reached the wreckage, which turned out to be the aft and much of the center portion of the ship. The center portion had been shattered and torn by something before it had fallen on them. Nonetheless, there were still some things in the hold: a few more caskets, which somehow hadn't fallen out after Zoro had cut this portion of the ship completely free from the rest; and, underneath them, something else, something with a handle, that Robin spotted.

Under her directions, Luffy slowly excavated it and then stared. "What the heck! It looks like, like some kind of tiny boat. But it's got no sail, and...." She looked at the end of it and frowned. "That looks like the engine my brother has on his personal surfboard. Almost, but not quite, like a shell and engine mixed? Though his ship doesn't have that control stick."

"That is definitely something that we need to grab," Robin said excitedly, her voice sending a shiver down Luffy's spine and causing Sanji to go into paroxysm of his normal twirling dance.

Ignoring the love-cook's antics, Luffy nodded at that and tied it to several more random ropes she had brought down, letting it hang there for a moment as they continued their search. But beyond books that had been so decayed that they were no longer readable or came apart when they were touched, a sight which caused Robin to actually let loose a low whine of pain, Luffy and Sanji couldn't find anything.

The only other thing that they found was something that Sanji found in a small treasure chest, situated in what must've been the captain's quarters. Inside it he found a feather of some kind, and he shook his head before coming out with Luffy. There were a couple of other things—a suit of armor that Luffy thought looked kind of cool and numerous amazing shells and other things—but she wasn't going to bother dragging it or any of the rest up to the surface.

Eventually the two pirates nodded at one another, and even Robin agreed that they had found everything they could. There were a few things that she would have liked to look at more closely that might have told her more of the ship's history, but they were already badly faded and that would have made that rather pointless. With that they headed back up towards the surface.

As they began to swim upwards, a large turtle swam by, a truly massive specimen of the breed, larger than the ships riding the surface of the ocean above them by far, looking almost like a miniature mountain. It chomped down on the remains of the ship, its eyes closing in evident enjoyment of the treat.

"Must not get enough fiber in its diet," Sanji remarked, causing both Luffy and a listening Robin to laugh, the sound causing Sanji to go into another dance as his eyes turned into hearts once more. Then they watched as the turtle moved as if it was about to surface, still chewing its treat.

"Well, I think we just found a faster way up," Luffy said, swimming over until she was right above the rising turtle and letting it come up underneath her, along with Sanji, who had raced to join her. The two of them grinned, smashing fists as they rode the turtle up towards the surface. *God, I love the Grand Line!*

As the turtle surfaced, there was shock and horror from the others they had left behind until they saw Luffy and Sanji sitting on top of the turtle rather than in its mouth. "God, worrying us like that," Makino said with a sigh. "I should've known better." She watched as Sanji and Luffy cut away the lines leading to them from the other pirate ship and began to hop through the air towards the Resolve, where Robin had pulled the odd little boat onto the deck.

They stopped, however, as a giant shadow suddenly appeared over them, even the turtle stopping its chewing for a moment to open its eyes and stare. Above the two pirate ships and the giant turtle was the shadow of some kind of giant. It was monstrously huge, larger than anything Luffy had heretofore seen. In its hands was a spear, the spear's point directed down towards the turtle.

Frowning, Luffy shook her head, pulling off the diving suit's helmet and staring around. "That can't be real," she shouted over the shrieks of fear from Nami, Chopper, and even Makino. She also noted that a few of the other pirate crew had opened their eyes only to slam them shut and tremble in place, but she ignored them.

"What do you mean, not real?" Nami said, stopping her wailing and running about to stare up at the redhead as Luffy finally alighted on the Resolve's deck.

"I mean, I might not be the best at Kenbunshoku Haki, but I'd be able to sense something like that, especially if it was a threat."

"But then, what's causing that shadow?" Chopper murmured, scratching at his chin for a moment. Then He exclaimed, "I got it! A giant shadow! That just means that someone is creating it, right, but from far away, like someone standing on top of a mountain."

"Yes. Very, very, far away and above us, Doctor-san," Robin said, closer to the sun. She looked over at Nami. "Will that do as proof that Sky Island exists, Navigator-san?"

"That something exists, anyway," Nami muttered, shaking her head. "All right!" she said, waving her hands in the air as everyone else stared at her. "I'll admit it's real, but I still don't see how we'll be able to get up there." As their faces began to fall, she then smirked and pulled out what she had found on the other pirate ship while Luffy and Sanji had gone diving. "However, I do know where we might get some more answers. Look what I found!"

She held up what looked like a Log Pose at first, until you noticed there was an actual name etched on the little gold plaque at the bottom. "An Eternal Pose to a nearby island named Jaya. I bet we could get some more questions answered there, right?"

"Makes sense to me," Luffy said with a nod, looking over at Robin. "Isn't that the island with the pirate town you mentioned?"

"It is, indeed. The town is called Mock Town because it is a mockery of a town," Robin replied. "I passed through there briefly, but it didn't have any kind of local architecture or history to interest me. Still, perhaps I was hasty."

"We could use some more supplies too. Not so much food, though, we could use more vegetables, red meat, and nails. We've got enough wood and metal strips, but not nails," Makino supplied.

"Good," Nami said with her own nod, then looked over at what they'd found, her eyes alighting on the odd-looking boat. She moved over to it, examining it closely. It was too damaged to make use of, but it was obviously something different than anything they had

previously seen. She moved the controls this way and that, muttering about how responsive it would be.

“It’s like some kind of personal rowboat,” Luffy said, looking at it again in interest. “But with some kind of propulsion to it?”

“Oooh, you used big words,” Nami said mockingly, pushing her shoulder against Luffy’s jokingly. “Still, it’s a good find if we can figure out a way to repair the ‘propulsion,’” she said, making little quote marks around the word while winking at Luffy.

Luffy laughed but waved her off. “I think we’ve got other fish to fry right now, Navigator, don’t we?”

“That’s right,” Nami said, moving towards the tiller and setting the Eternal Pose down on the balcony right in front of it. With that she began to bark out orders to the crew to trim the sails in a certain direction as well as raising the anchor. Soon after that they were on their way.

Behind the Resolve, on the other pirate vessel, one of the pirates stirred slightly, looking over the side. “They’re gone, and they found our backup Eternal Pose.”

“That was scary,” another man muttered, pushing himself to his feet. “Three people against our entire crew and they beats us like, like so many monkeys!”

“Don’t let the boss hear you say that,” said another, then gasped as did everyone else as they shouted as one, “The boss!”

“Which direction did they hit him?” said one of them as he raced towards the tiller of their giant vessel. “We need to find him!”

OOOOOOO

The trip to Jaya took the rest of that day and into the next, and the ship arrived offshore at Mock Town at nearly midmorning after an incident with a bird being shot by someone well over the horizon. That had made Luffy and the others twitch a little, but there wasn’t anything they could do about it, so they set it aside for now save for Chopper who was both worried and furious at the death.

The port of the small, mostly shabby looking town was filled with pirate ships. Every ship there was flying a version of the skull and crossbones, a riot of different colors, ship types, and designs. There was shouting in the distance, the sounds of laughter, gunfire, and fights. There were numerous drunkards just laying out on the wharfs. As they watched, two men were shot dead and their bodies dumped in the ocean by pirates of a rival crew while onlookers laughed and pointed or shouted insults.

“Oh my God, this place is horrible!” Nami muttered, shaking her head. She turned a glare on the rest of the crew. “Look, this place is a pirate haven, which means there will be fights around every corner, and I know you all too well to think you’ll just walk away from any provocation. So I want a promise from all of you who go ashore that you won’t fight here. We’re just here to get some information, some supplies, and get gone.”

“Hell, no!” Luffy said, crossing his hands in front of him, then staring sternly at Nami. “For one thing, you’re not in charge here, Nami. I’m the captain of this crew, remember?” He held Nami’s gaze until she looked away, scowling. “Second, that is a stupid ass vow to make when we don’t know what trouble we’re going to run into.” *I learned my lesson about stupid promises with Pig-boy, thank you so much.* “There’s no way I’ll hamper our crew like that in what amounts to enemy territory. Third, we’re pirates too, Nami. Fighting’s part of what we do.”

Her scowl deepened, but Luffy went on inexorably. “Chopper, you go with Nami as one group. Robin, you’ll come with me. Makino, you and Sanji are another group. Zoro, I want you to stay here, on guard. With what we have in our hold, that’s a necessity.”

Zoro frowned at that, but nodded. “Right.”

“Good. Now, let’s go,” Luffy said with a grin, leading the way off the ship, where the three groups all quickly went their separate ways.

What none of the Straw Hats had noticed, though, was that a few of the drunkards on nearby ships had heard what Luffy had said. And, after the majority of the Straw Hats had left, many of them began to make plans. Luffy had been right after all: fighting among themselves was something most pirates did as a matter of course.

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“Damn, Robin. What you told us about this place hardly did it justice! I’ve seen six, seven bars, five blacksmiths, an equal number of carpenters, and something like three real houses? Not certain that would even count as a town, really.” The two of them had to sidestep halfway through Luffy’s statement in order to dodge a man being thrown from a nearby rooftop that simply added more emphasis to his words.

“Truly lawless, indeed,” Robin said complacently, one of her hands appearing almost automatically when someone tried to grab her rear in passing. In an instant she twisted him into a pretzel shape, if a pretzel shape could be said to be screaming, and tossed him into a nearby alleyway.

They both stopped and looked up at the man who had tossed the individual which had nearly hit them. He was a large, heavily muscled man with wide shoulders, wearing a belt with a huge gold buckle and a Mexican wrestling mask that covered half his head. “I am the champion!” the man shouted.

Luffy looked up at him thoughtfully, then shook his head and started to move on. Robin moved to catch up with him, looking at her captain thoughtfully. “You’re not going to pick a fight?”

“He’s not worth my time,” Luffy said with a shrug. “I doubt he’s even the captain of his ship, frankly. He didn’t give off that kind of vibe.” *My ki sense might be limited, but I can tell that for sure. He doesn’t have Haki anyway, and that’s enough for now. Besides, between picking a fight or spending time with Robin, the choice is easy.*

When Luffy didn’t elaborate, Robin went back to their previous discussion. As they had left the ship, the two of them had begun to talk about what an island in the sky could be like, with their theories becoming more and more outlandish. Luffy stood by his theory that any animal up there would have to be incredibly light, whereas Robin favored the idea of specially evolved flying birds making up the vast majority of animals. How an ocean of any kind could be up there was something neither of them understood, though Robin speculated it had something to do with cloud formations. “I remember the clouds appearing particularly dense, for some reason, when we saw that shadow.”

As they crossed another street, looking around for shops where they could go for information and for more clothing for Robin—she had barely three sets of clothing with her, and hadn’t been able to find anything in the Rainbow Mist—she changed the subject slightly. “By the way, when we were in the Rainbow Mist, you mentioned a ‘Robin Hood.’ I thought it was most amusing that Chopper thought that could be my real last name.”

"Oh, that," Luffy said with a laugh, though he was looking at her out of the corner of his eye. "I read that story a long time ago."

"I find it odd that someone your age would speak of a long time ago. And yet, I get the impression that you actually mean it too, in the sense that an older individual might, rather than using it to describe something that could be more easily stated as, say, a few years back," Robin said.

Luffy shrugged again, now turning to give her a small smile. "And what does that mind of yours tell you that means?"

"I don't know yet," Robin said honestly. "I have several conjectures, many of which have to do with your curse, which defies even the...tenuous grasp on logic... Devil Fruits stick to?" She held up a finger, her lips widening into a smirk and then a smile as Luffy's eyes lit like blue fire in amusement at her, his own smirk widening into something that more resembled a Cheshire grin.

Both of them now knew they were playing, and Robin rather liked it and lifted up another long finger. "Two, your 'Haki' abilities. I have grown up on the Grand Line. I know quite a bit about Haki, even if I don't know how to generate it myself, and I have never heard of any abilities like yours, many of which are frankly on a legendary level, the type of ability that would spread through word of mouth even here on the Grand Line. Third, your general combat skills. A young rookie able to take on and not only defeat but kill a Shichibukai? And four, the fact that you keep on using phrases and dropping other little hints of information that you honestly should not have if you came from a little island in the East Blue rather than one that had access to a library such as the one I had access to when I was a child."

Luffy cocked his head thoughtfully. "So, you have all the pieces, now you're just putting it together. And once you do, what will you do after?"

Robin raised her hands, waving them to either side of her head in an over-the-top shrug. "What would I do? I'm already part of your crew and have no desire~ or need to change that state of affairs." She gave the word desire a little lilt to it, which caused Luffy to blush, something Robin enjoyed. "I simply wish to know."

"Tell you what, Robin," Luffy said with a smile, linking one arm with hers and moving them along. "You tell me about that library you just mentioned and why the Rio Poneglyph is your dream, the full story, and I'll tell you about my background."

Robin frowned at the memory of that long-ago time, the fear of the Buster Call rising within her. Despite Luffy's strength and skills, which she now fully trusted even if she didn't

know the origin for much of it, was still too strong for her to overcome. The fact that she was even thinking about sharing that past with him though was rather telling as she thought about it. "I will consider that," she said, closing down slightly but not moving away.

"That's fine. Take your time, Information Officer," Luffy said with a laugh. Then his arm moved from where it had been clasped around her own to her waist, pulling her into his side lightly. "Just remember, whatever happened in your past, that doesn't matter a damn to me. You're part of my crew, and you're a...friend," he said, hesitating slightly on the word 'friend' and gazing into her eyes for a moment, and now it was Robin's turn to blush. "And I'll help you however I may, face whatever I have to, to keep you here with me. To make you happy, because that's what nakama do."

Before Robin could respond to that statement—though how she would have, she didn't know—they were interrupted. "What's this, what's this? A young brat trying to make time with a lady!? This isn't exactly the place for that, kiddies, because if you don't watch your environment, well, look what happens!"

With a start, they both turned away from one another to look around them, realizing that a group of ten pirates had surrounded them. They were also armed with muskets and blades. One of them, wielding what Luffy recognized as a cavalry saber, of all things, nodded his head mockingly. "Now, we just want a bit of them ladies time...."

"And all your valuables," said another man, wielding a large tulwar.

"And all your valuables, of course," the first man said, nodding agreeably at him. "Then you can go on your way with nothing taken from you that the lady probably hasn't already parted ways with."

Growling at that last bit, Luffy took a single step to one side faster than the men could follow and grabbed the man standing there by his wrist. Before any of them could respond, Luffy had hurled that man into the first speaker so quickly and so hard that both of them went flying down the street to crash into what looked like a bar at the end of the street. The others stared in shock, but Luffy was already on them, his fists flashing out, smashing four of them into the dirt. "That is no way to speak to a lady, assholes!"

"I can take care of myself, Captain-san," Robin said sharply. With that she crossed her arms over her chest and clutched four others to the ground. The sound of their spines breaking was audible even over their screams of agony. "I have no wish nor desire to be some kind of innocent maiden who needs a man to fight my battles for me."

“I’ll make a note of that, Robin; just don’t clutch me, please? That looks painful as hell,” Luffy quipped, dodging around a punch and grabbing at the man who had thrown it, locking him in a submission hold and lifting the man off his feet, using his flailing legs to take out another man. Normally he wouldn’t have bothered with such a move, but he was honestly rather irritated that his moment with Robin had been interrupted.

As he finished his swing, the legs of the man Rama was using as a flail accidentally bumped into someone else. “Ah, sorry ’bout that,” Luffy began, only to stop and turn slightly as he really looked at the man he had accidentally bumped his victim into.

The man was large, standing nearly a full yard taller than Luffy. At first look the man looked fat, but it was the kind of fat that concealed a lot of muscle underneath. He moved surprisingly lightly on his feet as he took a small step backwards to stare back at Luffy. He wore a loose white shirt open at the front, showing his fat looking stomach and hairy chest, had black hair, a wide mouth, and short legs for his size. Under his arm he carried a large brown bag.

“ZHAZHAHAHAH!” the man bellowed, even as he looked closely at Luffy and then over at Robin. “And what exactly happened here?”

Luffy shrugged, not even noticing the man in his arms trying to break his grip desperately, only tightening the hold absentmindedly. “They were trying to shake myself and my crewmate here down and said some things one never should say to a lady. I figured they needed to pay for it in pain.”

“ZHAZHAHAHA!” the man laughed once more, a big booming sound that carried from one end of the street to the other. “Little dogs bark the loudest, right?!”

“Exactly,” Luffy said with a laugh of his own, though he never looked away from the man, who also had not turned his eyes away from Luffy.

“I like those eyes, Straw Hat boy,” the man said eventually after a full minute of staring down one another. “What’s your dream?”

“To be the Pirate King!” Luffy said, loudly and proudly.

For a moment, all movement around them stopped as everyone stared at Luffy. The rest of the onlookers had all watched and laughed as he and Robin had taken out the ten other pirates, shouting to one another about how the fools had asked for it and how the beauty in the cowboy hat seemed to have some fight to her. But now they simply started laughing and pointing at him. “Oh my God! You must be a rookie with a stupid dream of that!”

“This ocean eats dreams like that, boy! Turn away now before it’s too late!”

“Don't get cocky just because you think you can fight! You'll never last on this ocean!”

“Riches, gold, money, and wealth, gain those before you think about calling yourself a pirate king!”

But the big man didn't laugh. He simply stared back at Luffy, who finally let his victim drop so that he could cross his arms and stare back up at the man. Robin had known Luffy long enough now to know that this was the equivalent of Luffy becoming ready for a real fight, and she wondered why. Yes, the large man looked dangerous, but she couldn't detect anything beyond that.

Slowly the man's lips quirked, staring first at Luffy, then at Robin, then back, and he began to laugh. His booming laugh overcame many of the other passersby, and he shouted, “Dreams like that! Dreams like that are what shape the world! Straw Hat, the Age of Dreams will never die!” With that he turned, his laughter booming out as he pulled a pie out from under his arm and stuffed it into his face, shouting out around it, “ZAHAAAAH, this is such a great day!”

Luffy laughed in turn, ignoring everyone around him as he stared at the bigger man. As the large man disappeared around the corner, Robin moved to stand next to Luffy, who turned away and moved in the opposite direction of the large man. The two of them walked for few seconds in silence, ignoring those around them until Robin said, “You were oddly serious there, Captain.”

“Sometimes if a person becomes a good enough fighter, you can sense the strength of those you face. That man was dangerous, far more dangerous than his mere appearance would tell you,” Luffy said seriously. “And it wasn't him alone.”

Robin cocked her head thoughtfully, then frowned. “It was them? He and the two watchers were together?” With her habit of using multiple eyeballs all around her, Robin had spotted two men in among the rooftops, one of which had been that large, champion-shouting fellow from before.

“Yep,” Luffy said with a nod. “Their attention was on us, but mainly on him, just waiting for the word.”

On a scale of one to ten, that guy was eleven! Luffy could tell that that man was even more dangerous than Crocodile had been, possibly a **lot** more. Why his seventh sense was telling him that, Luffy didn't know precisely, but he wasn't about to doubt it after so long.

But now Luffy put it out of his head, having no wish to start a fight with someone like that at the moment. Instead he had spotted a store at the far end of the street. “There we go. You wanted some clothing, right?”

A wicked, teasing smirking appeared on Robin’s face, and she nodded before leaning in to whisper in his ear. “Indeed, and since you’ve behaved yourself so far, perhaps I might give you a treat?”

OOOOOOO

While this was going on, Zoro was dealing with his own issues. Instead of getting the glorious nap he had hoped for if he couldn’t go and get drunk, he was being forced to defend the ship from not one, but three different attempts to board from different pirate crews. He didn’t care overmuch one way or the other, he simply thought of it as a rather boring exercise routine. As the day wore on, he just wished that they’d all come at him at once, which would both have made it interesting and something he could deal with and then go back to napping. Instead they kept on coming every hour or so, with the groups getting larger.

Nami and Chopper, on the other hand, had a far easier time of it, at least at first. Nami found a clothing shop far more quickly than Robin and Luffy. Being almost as good at gathering information as Robin, she asked a few questions about the island in general—was there anything to see, how Jaya had become a pirate haven—while she moved around the store, buying still more clothing for herself.

Meeting up with Chopper outside, she nodded at him before resting the bags on Chopper’s antlers, as he was in his full-deer form for a moment. “I got some information on the best bars to go to for information, though I haven’t heard anyone talking about rivers to the sky, odd weather patterns, or anything like that. I still think we’re chasing a rainbow.”

Chopper shrugged as best he could in this form and then looked at the bags on his horns. “Are you sure you don’t already have enough clothing?”

“Silly Chopper!” Nami said, patting him on the helmet. “You can never have enough clothing. Now come on, let’s find an alleyway for you to transform into your normal form. I’ll want you looking small and mascot-like for this bit.”

Several minutes later they entered the first of the two bars Nami had been told to go to for the best information on local conditions. As they reached the street outside, they

watched a crew, marked out by a tattoo on their upper arms, carrying a man away. "So that was the hanged man. Doesn't seem to have been much?" said one of the passerby to another.

"Don't be an idiot," that one whispered back, staring up at the smashed window above them. "He ran into the Hyena! Of course he went down to that powerful rookie! It's not every day you run into a pirate with a sixty-five million bounty, anyway."

"Bellamy? Really? I'd heard he was in town," the first man muttered, nodding his head. "That makes sense."

Oh, Nami thought, *this could be a problem*. Sighing, she turned and whispered, "Chopper follow my lead in there, don't say anything, don't do anything without my permission, understood? Let me do the talking, and only if someone else throws a punch or something similar will you get involved, okay? We don't need a fight with someone who's got that large a bounty on his head."

Chopper nodded, though inwardly he wondered what his captain would say about that. Still, Nami had said he could still step in and protect her if things got physical, so he would willingly follow her lead. He wasn't the type to care about what people said about him these days anyway. Not since he met the Straw Hats and found how much they accepted him.

This was a good thing, because at the moment they entered a few pirates sitting nearby pointed at Chopper and laughed. "Oh my God! Look at that little freak! Seriously, what kind of monster is he supposed to be?"

Chopper turned to them, then gave them the finger as best he could with his tiny hooves. They laughed even more at that, but Nami steered him forward towards the bar at the far end of the room. She too had already garnered some attention, not that that was entirely unusual. There were few female pirates in the first place and fewer still who looked as good as Nami did. Indeed, she was rather surprised to see one girl here already, a girl with bottle-blond hair down to her shoulders and a bandana on her head combined with sunglasses. Yet, despite her best efforts, the girl's looks couldn't quite compare to Nami's.

Ignoring the crowd, Nami sat at the bar and ordered a drink for herself and for Chopper. She waited until the barkeep came back with their drinks and didn't seem in any rush to leave before saying, "So, my crew and I have a little problem. Our Log Pose is apparently pointing straight up, and we're wondering if there's any information here about how to get to Sky Island."

She would've gone on, but at that point Nami was interrupted by everyone in the bar, literally everyone, breaking out in raucous laughter directed at her. "Sky Island!" shouted one

man, who was wearing an open fur coat, of all things. He had long silver hair and was wearing yellow glasses along with pantaloons to go with the open coat and was sitting next to a slightly bulkier, blond-haired man who was wearing a muscle T-shirt in pink, who grinned like a cross between a shark and a pumpkin as he guffawed with his friend. "You seriously believe that! What a crock of shit!"

While she hated being laughed at, Nami kept her cool as she turned in their direction and asked, "Oh, so you're locals then? You know it doesn't exist, that there's something else affected our Log Pose? I thought the basic rule of the Grand Line was to always believe in and follow your Log Pose?"

"There's nothing up there!" said another man with a laugh, although more than a few of the other people in the room had stopped laughing at Nami's calm tone and her question. "Though you're not the first to come by and ask about it. The only guy around here who believes in that shit is that old man living on the other side of the island. There's nothing up there, and, even if there was, there's no way to reach it!"

"Dreamers," the other man, the tanned blonde man with the disconcerting grin, said with a laugh. "Only dreamers and other idiots believe in that kind of shit! Sky Island!" He guffawed again, waving his hand. "As if anything like that could exist. Keep chasing that, and you'll never see the treasures that are all around you if you have the vision to take them!"

Nami ground her teeth, a vein visibly twitching in her forehead now. She didn't like being laughed at normally since it reminded her too much of how Arlong and his crew would laugh at her occasionally. But instead of getting heated and argumentative, she simply leaned against the bar, one hand propping her head up on the bar as she smirked at them, pulling out the map they had found with one hand. "I can see you lot are a single pirate crew. Is your navigator here?"

At her cool tone the laughter subsided, the silver-haired man still grinning at her. "Yeah, I'm the navigator and first mate both. Why, babe? You need...directions?"

At his leer the rest of the crew broke out in laughter again, but once more Nami simply shook her head. "Then perhaps you can tell whether a map is authentic or not? You can tell how old it is, whether or not people actually labored over it with mapping tools, that kind of thing?"

"This map," she said, holding it next to her head and looking at it out of the corner her eye before turning back to the silver haired man "is real, right?"

The silver-haired man swaggered up, taking the opportunity to stare down Nami's shirt, which she had expected. Holding the map so that the name of the island was blocked, she waited for a few seconds, then asked him some specific questions about the map and how it had been drawn, things the best navigators would have noticed about any map and other things of that nature. When the man scowled at her and reached for the map, she pulled it back, moved her hand, and showed the silver man the ledger on top. "Look at that," she whispered mockingly. "It might be real!"

As the man scowled and there was a scattering of mutters, she went on. "We found it on a ship that fell on us from the sky. Now, I'm not saying that a ship couldn't have been launched into the air. I've seen similar things done, and I've no doubt my captain could do something like that."

That brought some more condescending laughter, save from the blond man, who was looking at her now with a smirk on his face and his arms crossed as he looked between her and the silver haired man. "But Occam's razor seems to indicate that we might not know something, rather than me being tricked by something so elaborate. Especially on a sea like the Grand Line, isn't it more likely that we just don't know and can't reach it than it doesn't exist? And, if it exists, then there might indeed be a way there," Nami finished.

The silver-haired man backed away as his crew and Captain laughed. "Heh, she's got you there, I suppose," the Hyena said with a chuckle, turning on his friend. "You'll still never be able to find a way to it, though, girly. It might be there, but it's a dead end. Just wait here on Jaya for twenty-four hours, and your Log Pose will be on a new course."

"We'll see," Nami said with a shrug, smug in her victory. "If we can't, we can't, but trying to find a way there sounds like the kind have fun my captain will really like."

"Dreamers!" the Hyena said again, scoffing. "You'll never get anywhere with that kind of attitude on this sea, so quick to chase after dreams instead of seeing the treasures that are real all around you." He eyed Nami up and down. "What say you join my crew instead, girl? You got skills, you got a brain, and you've got a great body! Wouldn't you be happier with a bunch of men rather than some dreaming punks?"

"You couldn't afford me," Nami said with a little growl, crossing her arms to hide her chest from the man's eyes now. "I'm a Straw Hat pirate," she said, pointing past the man to where she had spotted Luffy's wanted poster on the wall. It was from before they hit the Grand Line, but it was a still appreciable amount at sixty-five million.

Bellamy looked in the direction she pointed, then laughed. "You're with that rookie who somehow made up his own bounty? You don't honestly expect us to believe someone good enough to earn that kind of bounty would come from East Blue!?"

"Believe what you want," Nami said, her arms still covering her chest as best they could. "No skin off my back whatever you believe."

Bellamy laughed again. "Fine. So if I challenge and beat your captain down, will you join my crew then?"

"Sure, whatever," Nami replied with a roll of her eyes, waving him off before turning back to the bar. "Now leave me to my drink."

Bellamy guffawed again but stood up, smacking the silver-haired man's shoulder. "You heard the lady," he said with a loud laugh, making for the door. "We'll see you in a bit, our new navigator." The rest of his crew left as well, having taken that as a signal that, yes, Nami would join their crew if they proved they were stronger. Now they would find the rest of this crew of newbie dreamers.

With sparkles in his eyes, Chopper stared at Nami. "That was amazing! You were so cool and in control!"

Nami shrugged. "I suppose, but I've dealt with people like that all my life. Give them a hint that they can...torture...you later, and they'll leave you alone for now. And, besides, dealing with our madman of a captain has given me a very wide view of what we can do. Besides, you were going to fight him, right?"

Chopper nodded seriously. She had been seen that as the others had laughed at Nami and talked about how the Age of Dreams was dead. That kind of talk infuriated him beyond all reason, and Nami could sympathize.

"See," Nami said with a shrug. "It's easier this way." She then reached down and grabbed his chin, turning it up to face her as she went on seriously, her eyes boring into his. "Now, repeat after me. Avoiding fights is a good thing." Whimpering, Chopper could do nothing but answer as Nami wanted.

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At the same time that was going on, the large man that Luffy had run into was meeting with his crew. "So that was Nico Robin? She's being a bit more open about her presence than I would've thought someone like her would," said a rather sickly looking, if tall, man sitting on top of an equally sickly and tall horse. He had a basket of apples sitting on his saddle and carried along several other bags, all of which had the white cross that was used as a doctor's symbol. He was wearing a fur coat covering his upper body down to his knees and had long, lank hair.

"Bah, the rest of the crew are still small fry! I say we take them now, Captain! Surely turning Nico Robin over to the World Government would be enough for our plans to take advantage of the WG looking for a new Shichibukai." This speaker was the same musclebound man that had been shouting out about how he was a champion.

"Maybe, maybe not, Burgess. Besides, Nico Robin's known as being damn good at slipping away, and the chaos of any kind of fight like that would be perfect for her to do that. Besides, I don't want to get in the way of a man out with his girl; that'd be just rude." He then laughed his loud laugh, once more. "ZHAZHAZHA, especially if that girl has a reputation for stabbing people in the back."

"Indeed. And if it is fate that we fight this other crew, than surely the world will show the strong a sign that their way forward has been decided for them," said another man. He was a rather thin man who was just as tall as the rest of the odd group, with light brown hair which curled down to his lower neck and an emotionless seeming face. He wore a pair of glasses with the one lens seemingly normal rectangular glass while the other was circular and had a cross-hair etched on it.

"Exactly, Augur," Blackbeard replied. Yet, even as he spoke, the large man had already turned his mind to something else. *That hat, something about that hat. Why did I get such an odd feeling when I spotted it? And those eyes, those weren't the eyes of the rookie, no matter how ambitious or strong. Strange.*

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After Robin had turned Luffy into a blushing mess in the clothing store, the two of them had moved to a nearby store that sold all manner of weapons. They were attacked once more between the two stores, but Luffy had fun playing shot put with the attackers, aiming them at the various bars he saw.

Inside the store the two of them moved apart. Robin moved directly to the owner of the store behind the counter, asking first about buying some pistols, which were stored behind the counter. Beyond Makino's, the ship didn't have a supply of those, and one of the ones that caught her eyes was from North Blue, with a small sniper scope on it and a far more advanced look.

"That baby can hold six bullets in this small roll thing," the man said proudly. "I bartered for it off a drunkard once, and it's probably the best of its kind in the whole town."

"Indeed, it looks it. I won't even bother haggling with you on its price, so long as I get some kind of group discount for the rest. And...some information, too."

The man huffed. "Listen, miss, I'm in the business of selling weapons, not news. If you want that...."

He was interrupted by Luffy coming over and setting down two short daggers beside the pistols Robin had already asked about. He turned away again quickly, moving towards the corner where long poles were stored. "Erm, like I was saying, I don't know much, if you mean about the history of the island or nothin'. Jaya's only been the way it is for something like ten years. Before that there was a small resort and nothing else. It's not like this route through the Grand Line is the one used the most, after all. And...."

He stopped once more as Luffy returned, propping a few staves, a spear, and a staff that could separate into different portions connected by a small steel chain against the counter. At Robin's look he shrugged. "I might test Nami on them when we get back to the ship. She might be getting slowly better at shooting things, but her training has always been on staves." Actually Luffy wanted to see if they could find someone who could make Nami a special weapon from the tech they had taken from the Rainbow Mist and the idiots who had attempted to invade it. But that was well beyond Luffy's own skill set.

"Um, yeah,..." the man said, perking up even further. "Um, do you have any specific questions?"

"Yes. Our Log Pose is pointing nearly straight up, and we were wondering if there is anyone who believes in this Sky Island," Robin said, injecting just the right amount of amusement and interest into her voice to make it seem as if she was interested but also somewhat dismissive, just the right tone to use if you wanted someone to try and make you believe one thing over another. "We were also wondering where we could buy a map of the island."

“Hah!” The man barked out a laugh. “I’ve got a map you can buy of the island, but as for that Sky Island crud, I think that the only one mad enough to believe that is this old man named Montblanc Cricket. He lives somewhere else on the island, can’t rem....”

Again Luffy interrupted them, causing Robin’s lips to start twitching into a smile before she could control it. This time Luffy held up a cutlass he had taken from near the back of the shop. While the blade was just as wide as a katana, it was shorter than any one of the swordsman's swords, with a slight curve to it. It also had a guarded hilt, the guard having several sharp knobs coming out of it. The cutlass looked like a purely businesslike item, but the pointed knobs and the apparently decent craftsmanship (it was very well made, but not anywhere near even the worst of Zoro’s existing blades) gave it a somewhat more impressive feel. “How much for this?”

“Uh, that old thing? Twenty-thousand beli,” the man replied.

“I’ll give you fourteen thousand for it, and I won’t haggle over the rest,” Luffy said firmly, and he began to pull out some cash, looking at Robin. “Are you done?”

“Mmm, I don’t know, actually. He hasn’t answered my questions just yet,...” Robin said, shaking her head.

Luffy blinked at that, then put his cash away and turned. “In that case, come on. I bet we could find another store where we can get our questions answered and some weapons too. Even the cutlass isn’t all that good...”

“Wait!” the man said in an almost panic. He quickly leaned under the counter and pulled out a simple map of the island, slapping it down on the counter next to the pistols. He then pulled out a piece of charcoal and circled a section of the island straight across from Mock Town. “Here! Montblanc lives out there! He’s the only one who can give you any information on whether or not Sky Island is real. Hell, he’s the only one who even believes it’s real.”

Luffy nodded and then started to count out the cash for the man, who grinned, happy at what would be the biggest commission he’d had in months. Later Robin thumped her shoulder against Luffy’s. “That was very well done,” she said, letting her lips form a smile now that they were done questioning the shopkeeper.

“Heh. Makino-nee taught me a lot about haggling and such like, and that was actually kind of fun. Besides, you could stretch it into some kind of martial art, erm, Haggle-fu maybe?” Luffy said with a smirk.

Robin laughed aloud at that and then looked down at the map. It was a decent one, despite obviously being a copy of the original. Someone with talent had created it. Yet, even

so, it bothered Robin for some reason. "There's something odd about this map," she said aloud, staring down at it in thought.

"Odd how?" Luffy asked.

"I don't know, but it will come to me. Still, I think that the directions to the man who believes in Sky Island, this Montblanc fellow, is a good enough find for now."

Luffy nodded, then pointed ahead of them with a wide smile on her face. "I'll agree to that, and I think I just saw something else to spend our time on."

Robin turned her gaze in that direction and saw what looked like the entrance to a small but very nice-looking beach resort. There was an equally small beach there, complete with a few dozen lounge chairs, a bar set to one side, some umbrellas, and other things. Robin looked at Luffy, and Luffy looked at Robin. "Yeah?"

"Oh, yes indeed. After the past few weeks, I think we deserve it," Robin said with a firm nod.

With a laugh, they had pushed open the doors to the resort and moved directly towards the changing room.

"Excuse me!" shouted a man in a well-dressed suit, moving towards them hurriedly. "I'm sorry, but we're closed."

"Closed for what?" Luffy asked. "I only see a single ship docked here, and no one's currently using the beach."

"I'm afraid that we have been booked by the Bellamy Pirates entirely for their, um...their continued stay here on Jaya," said the man, looking around worriedly.

However, Luffy just shrugged and pulled out a wad of cash, hurling it at the man. "That should cover two people for a few hours, and, if it doesn't, I can give you more when we leave. Right now, I want some sun."

Robin nodded and asked the man, "Indeed, is there a place where can I go to change, please?"

Luffy looked at her quizzically, then down to what she was currently wearing, and then very deliberately back up again. Robin was currently wearing a pair of short shorts, cowgirl boots, and a loose white shirt over a black bikini top. "Really?"

"Well, I'll want to put on bikini bottom and get my boots off, at the least," Robin replied with a laugh and a light dusting of red on her tanned cheeks. *I do rather like where this is going....*

"That works," Luffy said with a laugh. "Just don't get me wet, please. I'd like to work on my tan for a bit, and the male body is a lot better for that kind of thing."

"That does sound like a nice idea," Robin said with a chuckle of her own. After all, until they'd run into the Purple Mist island, they'd been dealing with more than two weeks of rain. The idea of getting some real sun sounded nice to both of them. "And some drinks, perhaps," she said to the befuddled man, who was still counting the wad of cash that Luffy had tossed in his face.

About fifteen minutes later found Robin and Luffy laid out on lounge chairs, side-by-side, a few fruity cocktails between them on a small stand. "This is nice," Luffy said, leaning back and crossing his hands behind his head. "It's nice to be able to rest as hard as I fight."

From where she was lying out on her stomach, Robin nodded, looking over at him and idly wondered from where he had pulled out those sunglasses, and where they had come from in the first place. *Maybe he purchased them when I was looking at clothing? Luffy is oddly quick about such things for some reason.*

"Indeed," she said, then gestured, and a hand appeared next to Luffy, holding a bottle of suntan oil from the small table. "I don't suppose I could trouble you for some help?"

Luffy chuckled and took it, knowing that this was a come on, since Robin could certainly have used her powers to give herself a rub down anyway. "Far be it from me to say no to a lady's request," he murmured, sitting down next to Robin on her chair and warming his hands briefly before squeezing the tanning solution out on his hands.

For a second time in three weeks Luffy's hands moved over Robin's back, only this time there was no prevarication about this simply being a massage or about spreading her tanning oil everywhere. Instead, Luffy's hands caressed her, feeling the skin like satin under his fingers, her muscles twitching as she began to let loose little pleased gasps. Luffy found the arch of her foot was particularly sensitive and to keep away from the back of her knee, which seemed ticklish. His hands also began to caress down her sides, even going so far as to gently touch the sides of her breasts as they squished into the lounge chair. "Ahem, um, I'm nearly done here, Robin...unless you want to turn around?"

Throughout this process Robin was once more fighting with herself. One part of her wanted to embrace this feeling with her captain, not just because she knew that it would be a

fun time, but because she had somehow forged some kind of emotional connection with him too, a first for her. But her fears about needing to leave at some point in the future, awoken earlier by Ranma's question about wanting to know about her childhood, was still in her mind.

Yet now, for some reason, it wasn't as strong, the sheer exuberance Luffy had towards life and adventure having sparked the old feeling of joy in discovery in her as well as a feeling that she should seize the day and any joy she could get from it. *And of course there are my hormones too.... You know what? Just this, just this once, I think I'm going to be daring on an emotional level....* With that thought Robin turned and reached up, pulling Luffy down. "I think that's enough suntan oil...."

For a second Luffy wondered if this was a good idea, but his hormones ganged up on that thought. *Screw it! After more than a few months of teasing, I damn well need this!* With that he completed the move, and the two of them kissed.

The kiss started out somewhat hesitantly, but that faded within seconds as their lips pressed against one another. Robin's lips tasted of coffee and chocolate with a hint of cherry to Luffy, probably from her drink. In turn, Robin was surprised that Luffy's lips felt so good, and with the taste of orange, açai, and pomegranate, somehow.

The two of them kissed, pressing hard against one another as Luffy's hand fisted in Robin's hair while his other hand held the back of her neck gently. *Oh my, yes...* Robin thought to herself. Humming in approval, she slowly opened her mouth and moaned as Luffy's tongue slid in, licking at her own, then around her teeth, exploring her mouth ardently before their tongues began to duel, first in her mouth, then in midair, then in his mouth, and back again.

Luffy's hand slowly moved down from her hair to around her back, pulling her upright and twisting to one side until he sat up on the side of the chair now with her in his lap, sideways. Throughout this move they continued to make out heatedly, that same hand now moving down from her waist to Robin's rear, giving it an appreciative squeeze. They were so into one another that they didn't notice two waiters staring at them and then moving away quickly. They didn't even notice the arrival of over a hundred individuals, nor did they notice the argument going on between the manager who had taken Luffy's money and Bellamy.

Bellamy hurled the little officious fool aside as he stared at the beach where the two pirates were making out. For a moment he spotted what looked like a straw hat on one of the lounge chairs, but it hadn't registered just yet. Growling angrily he marched in that direction with the rest of his crew trailing behind him, grinning and laughing at what they were thinking was going to be some good comedy before they got some more money. "Hey, you bastards! You two are on private property!"

Despite this shout Luffy didn't look away, still continuing the intense make out session. One of Robin eyes blinked open and looked in that direction before looking away, pressing up harder against Luffy and rubbing her large breasts against his chest. Her mind had quickly analyzed the crowd of pirates and declared them no threats.

Bellamy growled angrily, bringing his fist down on the table, smashing their drinks and the table both. "Hey I'm talking to you!"

At that Luffy finally turned away from Robin and glared at the man. "Dude, don't cock-block me."

At that Robin pushed him away lightly, sliding back onto the lounge chair and pulling her legs up and around Luffy while pulling the lounge chair slightly more upright. "You wouldn't be getting that far on a first date," Robin said with a chuckle, a throaty little sound that caused tingles to go through the spine of every man there. "I'm interested in you, but I'm certainly not easy."

Luffy grinned at her, a twinkle in his eyes that caused her to flush. "An **adventure** wouldn't be fun if it was easy."

Robin laughed. "So should I be worried or proud you want to...plunder my treasures?"

Luffy shrugged. "I'm your captain and I'm a pirate, so your treasures are technically already mine. I'll get to plundering them eventually; I just have to convince you that you want it too." He frowned, then wrinkled his nose as he looked at her, his head cocked to one side in unspoken question.

"Yes, that one was a bit much. Six of out of ten, I feel, and that is only because of the preceding repartee. It was quite a reach," Robin replied, nodding seriously even as her eyes twinkled.

"I'll work on it, Robin," Luffy promised.

"Please do," Robin said with another laugh.

"God damn it, stop ignoring me!!" Bellamy shouted, launching it an attack with one of his arms, which turned into a spring. "Spring Snipe!"

But Luffy ducked under it with ease despite a second of surprise at the change. He then punched out, catching Bellamy in the chest so hard the man flew backward and out of the resort into the rest of the town, smashing through several buildings before he was out of sight.

Even from within the resort, Luffy could vaguely hear the roars of the angry owners of those buildings. And, in the nearest one, Luffy could just make out the image of a few dozen men boiling out of the building and attacking everyone nearby. *Huh. Oh right, pirates. I'd bet they thought someone else had thrown him or something; didn't think that he had been hurled from this far back.*

"You bastard!" shouted the silver-haired man who had been standing next to the blonde who had attacked him, dragging Luffy's attention back to the area around him. As Luffy watched he raced forward, pulling out an odd-looking sword, Luffy thought maybe a kukri.

But before Luffy could move, Robin sighed, crossing her arms over her chest and intoning her attack. "Seis Fleur: Twist!" The man gasped as hands appeared on his body, two grabbing his chin and two others his legs before they began to pull and twist. The last thing he saw before he fell unconscious from the pain was that the rest of the Bellamy Pirates had been similarly taken out.

Luffy then looked back at Robin with a scowl on his face. "So, I think the mood's been kind of ruined."

"Quite," Robin said with a chuckle before gesturing at the ruins of their drinks. "But I could use another drink?"

As Luffy stood up to go and grab a waiter, he asked, "Does this really count as a date?"

"About as much of one as I've ever been on, Luffy," Robin laughed. "And somehow I think we can't hope for anything less adventuresome in the future."

"Too true, with my luck," Luffy muttered, turning away to search for a waiter.

OOOOOOO

Nami and Chopper had been making their way back to the ship when they heard the commotion caused by someone smashing through a few buildings nearby. They looked at one another, then sped up quickly, hoping to get away from the commotion.

However, Bellamy was made of sterner stuff than Luffy had supposed. Yes, Luffy's blow had smashed a few ribs, but he was still conscious, and had activated his Bane Bane no Mi ability after smashing through two houses. That allowed him to bounce off the next and then around the street onto a rooftop nearby so that the momentum could leave his body slowly.

He glared angrily, shaking his head and holding his ribs with one hand as he stared in the direction he'd been attacked from, having connected the man he'd fought with his bounty poster and the straw hat nearby. *Dammit! Maybe his bounty isn't entirely made up. Still, he got lucky just then. I do have my guard up now, and I'll take him far more seriously now. Wait... Is that?...*

Seeing a mop of orange hair further down the street, he smirked. "While I know I could take him anyway, that doesn't mean I'm against stacking the deck in my favor." With that Bellamy transformed his legs into springs once more and hopped from rooftop to rooftop until he was directly above Nami and Chopper. Chopper was the first to notice, and he turned, shifting into his more human form and staring up at Bellamy as he leaped down, reaching for Nami. Nami, however, leaped out of the way of his bouncing flight, bringing out her small gun for a moment and glaring at the man. "I thought I told you no! You need to learn what that word means, Bellamy!"

"I met your captain, and he's tough," the man admitted as he bounced around the road, going faster with each bounce and timing them between every three words. "I could take him anyway, but I figure, since you're here, why not use you? If he cares about his crew, you're a hostage. If he doesn't," the man said with an evil, over the top grin, "you're meat shields."

Nami laughed loud and long, fearless and unafraid with her crewman beside her. "My captain could kick your ass whatever you tried, and he doesn't even have a Devil Fruit. You know the real difference between you and him, Bellamy? **Willpower!** My captain has the will to challenge the Grand Line, to stick to his dream come hell or high water! You, you don't have any will! You just have greed! That's why you'll never amount to **anything!**"

"We'll see if you are speaking that same tune after I rip out your captain's throat and have you under me!" the man said, bouncing forward, his hands grasping. "The age of dreams is dead, dead for all time!"

But before Bellamy's blow could land, Chopper had stepped forward. He brought his fist forward, hammering it into the oncoming Bellamy's face. "NO it isn't!" Chopper roared. Bellamy's own momentum forced his face deeper into Chopper's fist for a time until Chopper finished his swing, hurling the man aside like a rag doll to crash through a building, his entire face ruined.

"Nice, Chopper!" Nami said, patting Chopper on the shoulder.

Chopper smiled sheepishly even as he wrung out his hand. Bellamy's momentum had been quite a bit more than he had thought, thanks to the springs in his feet. *I think I sprained my wrist*, Chopper thought. *Totally worth it, though!*

Inside that building however, there had been another bar. “What the hell!?” shouted one drunken pirate, pushing Bellamy's comatose form off him and glaring angrily down at the ruins of his mug of beer. “Where did that come from! Was it one of you fools?!” he shouted, pointing at several other pirates on the other side of the bar.

“Are you blind as well as stupid? He came from outside!”

“Who are you calling stupid!?” shouted the first one, hurling his destroyed mug at the man.

This started a bar fight, which eventually began to spill out into the street as Nami and Chopper watched with sweat drops growing on their heads. “I think we need to get out of here,” Nami said.

Chopper, who had transformed back to his little body, nodded rapidly, and Nami quickly led the way down the street, back to the Resolve.

OOOOOOO

Back on the Resolve, Zoro cleaned his swords, holding them up to the light as he stared around at the broken, shattered remains of the last pirate crew that had attempted to attack the ship. “Really, you think you idiots would've learned after the second group, at the very least,” he muttered, sheathing his sword and moving over to start hefting bodies over the side. Whether they landed between the Resolve and the next pirate ship or down on the docks, he didn't care at this point.

Once he was nearly done with that job, he stared out into the town, where he could hear the sounds of combat starting to grow from several different places. “What the heck? Is this normal?”

He watched as Nami and Chopper raced through the chaos towards their ship, leaping up and onto it. “Where the heck are the others?” Nami growled, looking around the ship as she grabbed her bags from Chopper. “I think it's time we leave!”

Zoro shrugged, surreptitiously kicking the last body off the gunwales of the ship. “You two ran into trouble too?”

“What ‘too?’” Nami asked quickly, turning around to glare at him, catching the sight of the body he'd just kicked over the side. “Zoro, what have you been doing?” she asked slowly.

"I don't know why, but a few pirate groups tried to board our ship," Zoro said with a shrug. "Looks as if the captain was right for leaving me behind. There were so many of them, I'd bet the Love Cook would've become overwhelmed."

"I heard that, you national treasure!" shouted a voice, and they turned to watch Makino and Sanji make their way up the plank. Sanji calmly set down what looked like a small mountain worth of supplies, mostly vegetables of different types, before launching a kick towards Zoro. "And you better not have hurt any ladies among them!"

"Are you daft, love cook? They were pirates, and you know how few women pirates there are. I knocked most of them out, then tossed them over the side. If they're not still there now, they were strong enough to get away. And besides, they boarded our ship!" the first mate roared back, getting forehead to forehead with Sanji, glaring at him. "Get your priorities straight!"

"So we're only missing Robin and Luffy," Nami muttered, feeling a stab of jealousy at the idea that those two were out somewhere together.

"Actually, we saw them earlier," Makino said. "They were heading towards that small resort set to the left side of the town. We had stopped in there earlier, but were told it was booked solid by a Bellamy Pirate crew." Makino wrinkled her nose. "That's always struck me as stupid, you know: a crew taking their captain's name instead of coming up with a name of their own." She shook her head. "More importantly, if Luffy or Robin wanted into the resort, Luffy isn't going to take that for an answer unless the pirates are there at the time, and maybe not even then if he doesn't like the look of them."

"GRaaah! So it was them!" Nami growled, rubbing her head furiously in anger.

"Are you surprised?" Zoro asked, turning away from his fight with the love cook. "Wherever Luffy goes, he's going to create conflict, one way or another."

"God dammit, let me dream!" Nami shouted back.

"Hell no!" Zoro growled. "Think of it as payback for biting my hand earlier. And, judging by Chopper's wrist, it looks as if you ran into some trouble yourselves." Chopper had quickly wrapped up his wrist in a splint as he and Nami ran through the town. "I bet you're happy that the captain didn't let us make that stupid promise of yours earlier, aren't you, you witch?"

Nami growled, her fist rising up as Zoro turned back to continue his fight, only to feel Nami's fist on the back of his head. As Zoro lay insensate on the deck, Nami stalked away with a huff, moving towards the tiller. "Calling a lovely young lady a witch, honestly. Sanji-kun, push

us off the pier,” she ordered. “That place has a private port so we can dock there and get away from the heart of this madness.”

Staring after her and then at Zoro, who was now holding the back of his head, Chopper realized two things. One, he had known for a while: that Zoro had no fear. And two, Nami was **scary!**

It did not take them long to move the Resolve around the slight curve of the pier into the private area of the small resort, where they docked quickly. There they found a few hundred bodies piled up in loose heaps. Many of them still looked broken in myriad different ways, foam coming out of their mouths. And, on the small beach, Robin and Luffy were laying back on their lounge chairs, taking in the sun with sunglasses and hats on their head, looking as if they didn’t have a care in the world.

Luffy waved a lazy hand at them but didn't bother sitting up. “Hey, you lot. Pull up a lounge chair. We have two days before the Log Pose resets, so we've got time for some fun in the sun before moving on.”

At this blasé response to their arrival Nami growled, leaping off of the ship and landing on the wharf, stomped over to them before glaring down at the pair. But, before she could speak, Robin spoke up. “Mah, Navigator-kun, you seem to have had a difficult time of it. Would something large and fruity take the edge off?”

Nami glared and then huffed, twisted around, and flopped down on a lounge chair on the other side of Luffy. She then turned her glare on a nearby waiter. “You! A large strawberry daiquiri, and if it's virgin, I'll kill you! Then keep them coming, understand?”

The terrified young man nodded rapidly, then turned and ran off while Chopper, who had followed the others, hid behind Zoro. “Nami-san is so scary,” he whispered.

“Learn this lesson well, young one,” Zoro said, patting him on the head for a moment. “**All** women are scary in many different ways.”

“Don't feed him such lies, you national treasure!” Sanji growled. “Girls are soft, fluffy, precious, sweet-smelling, and beautiful!”

“You didn’t think that the last time Luffy kicked your ass in his female body,” Zoro retorted.

Sanji twitched but stopped speaking as they moved to join the others, with Makino coming up behind them, having ducked back into the ship to change into a bathing suit.

As Nami explained the amount of trouble they'd run into, Luffy stayed silent, and, when she finished, he simply shook his head. "I would've hit that Bellamy guy a lot harder if I knew he'd bothered you, but ya didn't want us to fight but then pointed him in my direction?" he teased, causing Nami to scowl while Luffy turned to Chopper. "But at least Chopper hit him a good one too, right?" he asked, holding out his fist toward the Zoan type.

Chopper grinned and raised his uninjured hoof to smack it, nodding eagerly. "I thought I did, anyway. He was unconscious before he hit the nearest building. But does that mean I did a better job at hitting him than you did?"

"My mind was on other things at the time," Luffy said loftily, causing Robin to burst into laughter on the lounge chair next to him, which, in turn, made Nami stare at her in suspicion.

Sitting down on another lounge chair nearby, Makino smirked. *Oh my word, did something happen here? I might have to talk to Robin-chan later.*

Luffy, however, had turned aside to look at Zoro, then down at his swords. "You've been busy too, I see."

"How can you tell?" Zoro asked, though he sounded as if he already knew the answer.

"That cursed sword of yours, Sandai Kitetsu, I can feel it was sated recently," Luffy said, almost glaring down at the blade.

Zoro shrugged. "This island seems to be full of small fry except for a few that are astronomically tougher. I saw this one tall man, a sniper, I think, of some kind, and his skills were insane. And then there was this other musclebound man roaring out about being a champion from the rooftops."

"Yeah, hopefully those few aren't going to pick a fight with us just yet. I've met their captain, and that's one fight I'm not going to go searching for just yet." In the distance they heard the chaos in Mock Town continue, but Luffy simply ignored it, gesturing around them. "I figured we all had earned an hour or so just lazing about here, so pull up a chair, guys, and order some food from someone other than Sanji."

"Even cooks require some downtime," the blond chef replied with a smile at that, taking a lounge chair next to Nami and looking at her thoughtfully. "But aren't you going to go and get a bathing suit, Nami?"

"Oh, that's right," Nami said, clapping her hands and suddenly switching moods. "I just bought a new one, too\.. I'll be right back!"

The Straw Hats lounged for two hours, being waited on hand and foot by the semi-terrified workers. They weren't so much terrified of the Straw Hats, though Nami's introduction had horrified that particular waiter, but the bodies of the Hyenas' crew scattered around the place threw them off, as did the Straw Hats' ignoring of said. Added to that were the ongoing sounds of fighting going through the town.

Eventually, however, Luffy sighed and stood up, stretching and smiling brightly. "All right, everybody, I think it's time we move on."

"Move on where?" Nami asked, also getting up as the others did the same. She had taken a brief break to go and explore the Bellamy Pirates' ship, stealing everything inside that looked shiny, but, beyond that, found that, like the other girls, getting some sun in a somewhat peaceful setting had been a godsend. The last time they'd been able to do that they'd been interrupted by that old marine captain, after all. "We didn't really discover any more hints about getting to Sky Island. Did you have better luck?"

Robin explained as Luffy led the rest of them back to the ship, none of them bothering to change out of their swimsuits for now. Moments later they were out of the port and hugging the coast as they moved around the island. They left behind a group of happy, if somewhat confused, resort workers. The same young waiter Nami had terrified earlier turned to the manager and asked, "Um, so are we supposed to just heave the bodies onto their ship or bury them or what?"

OOOOOOO

"GHAHAHAH! I thought this place was relatively peaceful, but then every pirate crew started fighting every other pirate crew for some reason," Burgess laughed, watching the chaos from on high. Normally he'd be getting involved, but none of the pirates here were really worth his time at this point, and, besides, watching the chaos with a tub of popcorn in his lap was fun too. "Did Doc Q maybe blow up the wrong person?" he teased, looking over at the sickly looking man, who had somehow gotten both himself and his horse up onto the roof without any help.

"I don't know," their leader said, scratching at his chin thoughtfully. "It looks like it's subsiding, but still, Burgess, Doc Q, you two see if you can find out what happened. I'll wait here for sharpshooter."

The man called Augur arrived at the same time the others returned, the tall, thin man carrying a newspaper. Burgess reported that the fight had been started by five of the bars in the town being smashed up by someone being thrown or punched through their walls. Drunken pirates being what they were, that was enough, though Bellamy, the local big fish, had been involved too. Only, rumor said that it had been his body which had been smashed through at least two of the bars. Burgess cheerfully predicted that the fights would restart once the pirates realized that they had smashed most of the sources of alcohol in the town and had to fight for what was left, but that would happen later.

Shaking his head with a guffaw at the weakling's comeuppance, Blackbeard turned to look at his crew's sniper. "And what do you have for us?"

"I spotted this on the wing, along with a few others in the distance. But I felt fated to take it down and find out what information it held within. I was correct. Fate has shown us the way forward, and your wish for a large enough target to come our way has occurred, Captain Blackbeard."

Frowning, Blackbeard took the sheaf of bounty posters and read them one after another. "Now, that's more like it!" Burgess shouted as the musclebound champion stared over his captain's elbow. "None of them are worth a tremendous amount alone, but they're all worth a decent amount, and together that could make our name right there!"

"I thought his previous bounty was a bit low for a boy with that kind of will and strength, but why was he given this larger bounty?" Blackbeard muttered.

"The biggest event that's happened recently is the death of Crocodile, the one that's given us an opening in the Shichibukai," the doctor said. "The news stated that he died in battle against Commodore Smoker, but...."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Burgess said with a nod. "If he actually killed a Shichibukai, that bounty of his makes sense."

"True," their captain muttered, frowning and scratching his fat stomach. "But I don't want to underestimate someone who killed Crocodile. Overconfident Logia user he might have been, but he was also a New World veteran. Hell, he even attacked Whitebeard before retreating to Paradise."

"And there's the fact that we won't want Robin to be able to escape. If we can hand her over alive, we can probably assume double the amount on her bounty, let alone the rest," the sniper said. "Although these two pictures amuse me," the sniper said, taking off his monocle and wiping at it as he smirked.

After guffawing at the pictures, the captain became serious again, pointing once more at Burgess and the doctor. "Listen, find the captains of the surviving crews, you two. Gather them up at that one bar that's still in one piece. I'll spin them a yarn, I think, and then we can make use of those crews too."

"Cannon fodder to feed into the fire, you think?" the Augur asked.

"That's right. But to do that I'll have to make up a story, which means no more news and no other copies of their bounty. They'll go for the original bounties, but, if we let them see the rest, these pathetic excuses for pirates will chicken out," Blackbeard said with a sneer.

"You realize that shooting down that many pelicans will cause a ruckus with Big News Morgans?" the Augur asked.

"What part of pirates is vague?" Blackbeard said, waving him off. "Just do it and start now. Hopefully you haven't missed any landing yet."

Augur nodded quickly and turned, already readying his gun.

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As they moved around the island, the crew was surprised to see another ship towards the ocean off their starboard bow, coming towards Jaya. It was another large ship like the one they had met earlier that day and, like it, definitely had a certain jungle fever look to it. Makino again scowled, shaking her head as she looked at it from the deck this time. "What is it with the people around here and their ship designs?"

"You sound like some kind of high-class lady when you say that, you know," Nami remarked, while Robin merely chuckled, staring at the ship from where she was standing by the starboard side of the ship.

As it came close, a loud voice rang out from on high. "Ahoy, you lot! Where are you off to?"

Luffy leaped up onto the crow's nest, staring across and shaking his head at the man who stood there. He looked like an orangutan, but with green hair so long it fell to his leg, a button up shirt which looked two sizes too small for his somewhat rotund torso, covered in turn by a green captain's coat matched to a green captain's hat with his crew's jolly roger on the front.

"Another monkey man?" Luffy asked, cocking his head to one side thoughtfully.

"I see you've made my brother's acquaintance! He is, indeed, a monkey. I, however, resemble the far superior orangutan! Surely you've heard of the great Shoujou," the other pirate captain said, moving to stand at the side of his own ship and looking down at the shorter Resolve thoughtfully as he stroked his long green hair. "I trust my brother is well; he's been out to sea for a few weeks now."

"He was when last I saw him," Luffy said with a shrug, lying easily. "But he had to fly," he added, causing Sanji to snort below him and the rest of the crew to hide their chuckles behind their hands. "As for here, having heard of you, sorry. Can't say I have."

"What a shock!" Shoujou said, grabbing at his chest and falling backwards on his feet in surprise.

His crew, however, all of whom were dressed like some kind of odd amalgamation of an anglerfish and a diver, complete with little hanging things that could be lights over their heads, growled angrily. "How dare you disrespect the boss like that! Don't you know he's in the running for the next Shichibukai position!"

"Nope," Luffy said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Haven't heard that either."

"Well, whatever," Shoujou said as his crew roared outrage in the background. "Despite you not having heard of me, these are our waters. My brother and I allow Mock Town to exist normally, but the rest of the island belongs to us. If you're going anywhere else you have to pay a toll."

"And what happens if we don't?" Luffy asked. He wasn't all that interested in another fight, but he also wasn't about to be shaken down for cash by another pirate.

"We're both pirates, young man," the other man said with a laugh. "We both know exactly what'll happen."

Luffy rolled his eyes. "In that case, I suggest we get to it...."

But before Luffy could move, Shoujou picked up some kind of microphone, and yelled into it. "Havoc Sonar WHAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!" From the sides of his ship massive amplifiers of some kind exploded in sound, targeting the smaller Resolve.

The Resolve and the people on board immediately felt the impact of the voice, which started to shake the ship apart, its seams twisting this way and that as the rivets holding it all together were shifted out of position. Further damage quickly began to accumulate while

Chopper howled in pain, dropping to his knees. While the attack was painful for the humans, to Chopper and his sensitive hearing, it was horrible.

“That’s my ship, asshole!” Luffy roared, leaping towards the other ship, ignoring the pain in his ears in order to deal with the cause of it all the faster.

Before Shoujou could move, Luffy was on him. A hard blow took the ape in the chin, sending him smashing backwards into the built-up center section of his ship. With a roar, Shoujou's crew attacked, but by that point Zoro along with Sanji had joined Luffy, and the three of them dealt with them all easily.

With that done, Luffy retrieved Nami and ordered her to search the ship. “Find any treasure they have and take it. That'll teach them not to attack strangers. Sanji, watch this lot and, in particular, the captain. If they twitch, knock them out again.”

Nami saluted happily and swiftly went below as Luffy leaped back down to the Resolve, shaking his head as he stared around it. Several of the floorboards of the main deck had shattered, portions of the banister on the starboard side was gone, and Luffy saw what looked like cracks starting to appear in one of the main masts and several other examples of damage. “This is going to take a while,” he said with a sigh. “Zoro, Chopper, let’s get to work. And Makino, good call on getting us more nails when we were in Mock Town.”

Luffy’s prediction soon proved accurate. By the time they were done the sun was nearly setting in the distance, but Luffy was able to repair most of the damage with Zoro and Chopper's help. Nami, too, took a small haul of treasure, not a lot, but a few trinkets, mostly large pieces of jewelry and a few very nice rubies, though where they'd come from, she couldn't tell. Twice Sanji had knocked the captain out again during this time, but he did so with a will. After all, his sonic attack had targeted the girls just as much as the rest of the crew.

“All right,” Luffy said, looking around at the ship with a final sigh. “I've done all the repairs I can. Let's get this ship sailing again.”

OOOOOOO

Once more the Resolve moved off, leaving a crew of fellow pirate unconscious, but still alive, behind them. The crew of this ship were oddly thankful for this, even if their captain had several dozen lumps on him from the beating he taken. The first mate, marked out by a white

stripe around his middle, raised a hand. "So, I think that whole Shichibukai rumor we started has gone to the captain's head. All those in favor of no longer spreading it, say aye?"

"Aye," shouted a lot of voices.

The first mate nodded and went on, staring around the damaged ship. "And now that they're gone, we can start our own repairs too. Let's get to it before we lose the sun."

Luckily for this band of the Monkey Pirates, help was on the way in the form of a large ship, which Luffy and his fellows were somewhat familiar with from earlier that day.

OOOOOOO

"Wow, it's a castle!" Chopper exclaimed as they came within sight of their target later that evening.

Luffy scratched his pigtail under his hat and looked over at the others, who shook their heads. "I don't think so, Chopper."

The truth of the matter became apparent as the sight came closer. What was actually there was a small hut sitting directly on the edge of a ragged cliff face which went straight down into the ocean. On that side a large, three-story billboard had been set against the hut and then painted to look like a giant castle, complete with balconies, wall, and multicolored pennants flying from pointed towers.

"I think we have an overly proud man here," Sanji muttered, leaping over the side and racing towards a tree near the edge of the cliff to tie off the ship.

"Or someone who has an overactive imagination, at least," Luffy said with a chuckle, leaping over the banister himself. "And, considering the specific adventure we're on right now, that could probably be a good thing."

The others followed Sanji and Luffy onto the shore, looking around quizzically. Robin, in particular, stared at the house, her head to one side as she pulled out a small book, moving to look at the side of the hut. Makino noticed this and followed while Luffy and Zoro looked around. "What is it, Robin?"

"This hut, it looks extremely old. The billboard is new, of course, but the rest is ancient...." Robin ran her hand over the side of the hut, thinking. "The building structure is unknown to me, but the construction seems to indicate it is at least four hundred years old."

At that point Nami, who had been moving to the entrance to the hut, stopped by a large tree-stump. On it was a children's book, of all things, and Nami picked it up, looking at it curiously. "The Great Liar Norland. Neat name."

Blinking in surprise, Sanji turned in her direction. "That sounds awfully familiar. I think it's a story from North Blue."

"North Blue?" Nami asked, looking over at him. "I thought you were like the rest of us and came from East Blue."

Sanji shook his head. "No, I was originally from North Blue." Before anyone could ask about that and how he had found himself in East Blue apprenticed to an ex-pirate, he went on hurriedly. "I think it's a story about an explorer of some kind for a king from long ago and how he came back and made these huge whopping tales up. But he was eventually put to death."

Eagerly, Chopper raced over to Nami, looking up at the book in her hand. At his look, Nami sat down and began to read while the others listened.

As Nami finished, Robin said thoughtfully, "That is a bit of a tragic tale. But it is also an interesting one, considering what we already assume could be true."

"True or not, we're here because he believes that Sky Island is up there and might be able to tell us something about it. But for that, we need the actual man in question."

As if summoned by Luffy's words, a hand reached up over the lip of the cliff face and grabbed his ankle, yanking back hard. Luffy hadn't been expecting an attack, and he squawked in shock, his head hitting the side of the cliff as he was pulled back and over, hurled down into the water before he could respond.

"What the!?" Zoro and Sanji both shouted, moving forward.

A large man, about a head and a half taller than any of the boys and wider in the shoulders, hopped up over the lip of the cliff. He wore swimming trunks and was wet from the water, but the most startling thing about him was the chestnut that seemed to be growing out of his hair, or perhaps the hair was the chestnut, it wasn't clear one way or the other. "Intruders! You'll find nothing here but hard knocks!"

Then the man threw himself forward, only to be attacked in turn by Luffy, who had, after plunging into the water, pushed herself upwards and then up into the air via Geppo. The

man was sent tumbling forward as Luffy landed behind him, growling angrily. "What'd you do that for, old man? We're here to talk, not pick fights."

"What the?..." the man said, first glaring over his shoulder at Luffy, then blinking and turning to face the redhead fully, looking very, very confused. "You, were you a girl when I pulled you off the edge?" Before he could truly understand what had happened with Luffy, the man doubled over, clutching his stomach as he fell to his side. "Guuuuh...."

Luffy frowned. "I didn't hit his stomach. Chopper?"

Chopper raced over, already pulling out his small bag as he began to examine the man. "It's a very bad case of the bends, and one that has built on other examples of it too! This man is pushing himself to his death diving everyday, no doubt!"

Frowning, Luffy absentmindedly pulled off her shirt and began to squeeze it out before remembering there were two other men here, turning a glare on them. Zoro had already turned away, but Sanji was staring, hearts in his eyes and blood flowing from his nostrils. "Oh, God dammit, Sanji!" Luffy snarled, hurling her wet shirt at the boy's face.

As she pulled out of a dry one, Luffy didn't see the look at Robin had been giving her as she had changed forms and then changed shirts, but noticed it upon hearing the thoughtful hum the other woman let loose. Luffy looked at her questioningly, and she simply shrugged and smiled, letting her eyes rake down the redhead's form, causing Luffy to smile in turn. He then turned back to the man. Nami had kneeled next to him, beginning to help Chopper straighten him out and push him onto his back to better allow the doctor to help him.

Later they helped the man inside and introduced themselves. Sitting by a window, the man lit up a cigarette and nodded his head slowly at them all, while outside, night settled in. "Name's Montblanc Cricket, kids. Thanks for the help, I suppose. But what're you doing here?"

"You mean, besides from keeping you from killing yourself?" Luffy asked. "And that last name and your appearance, are you related to the Norland from the story?"

"That's right!" Chopper shouted, leaping up and grabbing the man's cigarette. "You're repeated diving has injured your internal organs severely, and that includes your lungs!"

"Oy!" the man shouted, trying to grab back the cigarette, but Chopper raced away, and Luffy and the others laughed. "Bleeding punks," the man muttered, shaking his head. "And, damn it, yes, I'm related to Cricket. But what brings you here?"

"We were told you believe in Sky Island. We think it's real too, and we want to go there," Luffy replied bluntly. "We've had a ship fall out of the sky on top of us, have half a map,

and, frankly, it just sounds too awesome for me to not want it to be real!" Luffy said, her grin so wide it looked as if it should have taken her head off. Around Luffy, her crew smirked or smiled as their personalities dictated.

For a moment Montblanc stared at her, the smile seemingly taking him aback, then he scoffed. "So you're here for that old tale about Sky Island? Well, I can tell you some stuff about it, but whether or not you'll believe it is up to you."

Luffy looked at him thoughtfully, crossing her arms as nearby Robin had started a cup of tea, or, rather, coffee for her and hot water for Luffy to change back to her male body. Eventually she nodded. "All right, we'll believe you."

"Just like that?" Montblanc asked, pulling out another cigarette, lighting it up, and inhaling before he raised a hand and blocked Chopper's attempt to repeat his earlier action of grabbing it out of Montblanc's mouth.

Nearby, Sanji looked at him, blowing smoke rings from his own cigarette. Then he shrugged. "Well, if the captain says so." Most of the others had similar reactions.

Nami frowned. "I don't know. I'm not as trusting as you lot are, but...." She looked at Luffy, then chuckled. "But I have to say that the captain's track record for spotting who to trust has been pretty darn good. And it wouldn't be as amazing as certain other things either,..." she said with a full blown laugh as Luffy dumped the now hot water over her head, earning a frown from Robin and a mutter of having wanted to have some coffee first.

To the crew's surprise, Montblanc responded to this sight only by a slight widening of his eyes and another puff of his cigarette even as he kept Chopper away once more. "The captain believes in Sky Island, and the crew believes in the captain. That's not a bad way to organize things, I suppose," he said at last. "But most of what I can tell you is simple conjecture. I've never been to Sky Island myself. Does that discourage you?"

Luffy shrugged. "Even if we don't know anything for a fact, we'd still want to see it, we'd still want to believe in it. It's like, anyone would want to see what's beyond the horizon, the dream of it and the hope that it's real. That there is that kind of wonder in the world."

"Well said," Makino said with a smile, and even Nami grinned agreement, while Zoro and Sanji chuckled, Chopper looked up at his captain in awe, and Robin simply chuckled.

Even the older man laughed. "A crew of dreamers! I like that, boy! All right, so here's what we know. There is a theory that Sky Island sits on a special kind of cloud called Island cloud. You know about Seastone?"

From there the man began to explain all he had theorized about the existence of Sky Island. Halfway through the man's tale, they were interrupted by the door banging open, and the two monkey captains appeared. "Old man, are you all right!?" they shouted as one, then glared at Luffy and his crew. "You lot, what are you doing here!?"

"Exactly what we told you we would be doing: trying to figure out if Sky Island is real," Luffy replied, looking at them with his head to one side. "Huh, you two are more durable than I honestly expected."

"And don't shout!" Chopper said, wagging a hoof at them. "The old man is sick and needs his rest. We've helped him a bit today when he could have died from the bends, but he's still not out of the woods."

"What! You helped him?" When Chopper nodded, the two monkeys seemed to deflate and then cried. "You are such good guys!"

After a second thought, Chopper cocked his head to one side. "Wait, how do you know them, Cricket-san?"

"Bah, they are just fans of the stories! They barged in here months ago and basically demanded to become my subordinates." Montblanc smirked over at the two monkey-men. "They kind of saved my from my own loneliness, I suppose."

"Wow, that's so cool," Chopper said, then suddenly shifted to his larger form, grabbing Montblanc and shaking him. "Then why don't you use their diving equipment, you stupid old man!?"

"Because I've got my pride and can dive deeper than they can go!" Montblanc roared, grabbing Chopper in turn. "Don't judge me like that, you little shit!"

"Don't call me a little shit, you, you giant stupid turd! That makes no sense at all!" Chopper shouted back, his teeth even shifting to almost match the shark-like teeth Nami sometimes showed when she was angry. "Stupid old man, are you trying to kill yourself out of pride or something equally idiotic?!"

Zoro smirked, smacking Luffy on the shoulder. "I'm starting to see some of your influence rubbing off on our doctor."

"Heh, I'm so proud," Luffy replied, wiping away an imaginary tear. "Soon he'll be taunting with the best of them and even have a large bounty of his own." He then looked sideways at Sanji. "Who knows, he might even get a real picture too."

While Sanji twitched at that jibe, Nami rolled her eyes. "Cricket-san, you were saying something?"

Pushing Chopper away, Montblanc huffed and moved to a nearby trunk. "I was saying that, even if it is circumstantial, there is some proof that something existed there, smashed into the sky by the Knockup Stream." From within the trunk he pulled out a large bell about the size of his fists pressed together, made entirely of gold

"Gold!" Nami exclaimed, reaching for it.

"No," Luffy said, reaching forward and grabbing her shirt, pulling her back to land on her rear before rubbing her head. "Bad Nami."

Nami pouted at that but subsided as the man laughed, tossing her the gold bell, which she caught with difficulty. He in turn pulled out a statue of some kind of bird also made of gold before he continued to speak. Nami rubbed her cheek against the gold, cooing at it like it was an animal, while Robin peered at the bell, studying the images closely as she wrote some of them out in her notebook.

"So this Knockout Stream would be able to carry us up to these super-dense clouds?" Luffy asked, and then winked over at Robin. "Looks like you called that one."

"I might have, but I didn't honestly believe in it," Robin replied with a smile, looking up from her work.

"It'll carry you up there or kill you," Montblanc said bluntly. "If you're not right in the center it can hurl your ship into the sky halfway and then dump you to the side or just shatter your ship; it is that powerful."

Luffy looked over at Nami, who nodded. The way Montblanc had described it, she believed such a thing could be technically possible. "It sounds impossible, but so does the entire Grand Line, really," she said aloud. "But how long will we have to wait around for this Knockup Stream?"

"Tomorrow at midday," the man said bluntly.

"That close!" Sanji muttered, looking at the Montblanc closely before once more pulling out his cigarette to blow a smoke ring. "I'm wondering how our luck is. I mean, this is some shitty weird coincidence."

The older man shrugged once more. "Believe me or not, that's up to you. But we can get you out to where the Knockup Stream will happen next, and we can even fit out your ship

for the trip. You'll need some additions to it or else the wind of the passage carrying you up will also push you off the Stream."

Luffy looked at the man and the monkeys who were nodding excitedly at the very idea, then shrugged his shoulders. "You can't be a pirate king without a lot of luck, both good and bad, Sanji. I think we can trust him. But how are we going to get out to a specific spot on the ocean? Nami's good, but no navigator is that good in the Grand Line."

Nami blushed at the offhand compliment, while Montblanc nodded, patting the statue of the South Bird. "That is what this little fellow is for. This is the South Bird. Its beak always faces south, straight south, from wherever it is. It'll get you out there...if you can find one, anyway," he finished, smirking evilly at them.

OOOOOOO

"That much gold? Are you serious?!" said one captain, looking at the large Blackbeard.

"That's what my crewman said when he came back from Alabasta," Blackbeard said, nodding seriously. He had acted as a loyal 'son' to Whitebeard for over two decades. Tricking these fools was nothing for him. "According to him they stole a shipment of gold from the World Government sent to Alabasta to help the island get back on its feet after the civil war. It's more than five billion in gold, hence their huge bounty."

"That much gold at on top of the bounty itself! He's right, there would be enough for everyone," said another pirate captain, pulling at the rim of his hat as he stared around the room at the others. That, of course, was pirate parlance for, 'there would be enough for the survivors,' but every captain there understood that.

"All right, Blackbeard, we're in. Just don't you dare try to double cross us, or we'll send you to the bottom just like them."

"Of course not," Blackbeard said, now looking mildly affronted.

"What about you, Hyena? Are you in?" asked another man, looking towards the battered form of Bellamy, who was here only because he was a known Devil Fruit user, not because anyone felt he could actually help in his current condition.

When the Hyena spoke, he confirmed this fact, his voice a mumble through the ruins of his face. He had several ribs broken, lost most of his teeth, his jaw was wired shut, and his eyes

were nearly closed with the swelling in his face. "No, I'm not in. My crew is all injured; I'm the only one that can even walk, for God sakes! You lot will have to do this without me," he ground out, staring at Blackbeard, who smirked back at him.

Bellamy could tell that the older man was planning something, but he couldn't care less about the rest of the pirates here anyway, so what did he care what that plan was? No, he was just happy that most of his crew would recover thanks to their two doctors, neither of which were much good, really, but had been out gathering supplies and hadn't been part of the encounter with Straw Hat and his cursed bitch. *Maybe that way we can all get out of here and find the Don, tell him about that asshole and his crew.*

"More for the rest of us," said another pirate captain, grinning. "Their ship might be tough, but there's no way they could fight all of us at sea!"

"That's the spirit!" Blackbeard said with a laugh.

"Why did you want us in on this anyway? Your ship's a galleon, Blackbeard. I've seen the number of guns it's got," said another captain suspiciously.

Blackbeard shrugged. "My ship's big but slow. I couldn't even catch up to their schooner, let alone pin it down to pound it into pieces. But we've got enough guns to knock it down to Davy Jones if we can do that." This wasn't a lie. If the Resolve, a schooner rig, wanted to, it could show Blackbeard's ship its heels any time it wanted. Even so, his ship was a little faster than he was letting on.

The other captains nodded, as that made sense. With that, all of them stood up and left the sole remaining alehouse, heading back to their ships. "In that case, we'll see you out on the water, Blackbeard."

Left behind, Blackbeard smirked at Bellamy, asking sarcastically, "What, not going to shout out about how dreams don't matter any longer, you daft punk?" Bellamy growled but said nothing, turning aside. "At least one little dog has learned its place today, then," Blackbeard said with another loud guffaw as he too left.

Bellamy sat there for a moment, staring after the other pirate and then down at the bounty before scowling and rising shakily to his feet. *I might be a small fish in this sea, Blackbeard, but I'm smart enough to have already made friends with a leviathan. And if I can convince Doflamingo to show an interest in this Luffy character or you, you might both pay for this day's work.*

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"All right, that is it!" Luffy shouted, punching aside another giant bug as Nami cowered behind them. "I have had enough of this!"

"Those South Birds are acting like generals, sending in these animals like troops!" Chopper said, shaking his head. "I keep hearing them in the distance, saying things like, 'this is our forest' and 'get out, humans' and 'you'll never catch us!'"

"Yeah, but we don't have to keep playing their game," Luffy muttered, then thumped one foot down on the ground as he released his Haoshoku Haki.

Behind Luffy, his crew twitched, Nami and Chopper feeling somewhat faint while the others staggered, and they weren't even the target of it. But all of them bore up with various levels of difficulty, with Zoro throwing it off the easiest and Chopper having the worst time of it, with Nami next.

However, the effect on the attacking creatures was far more profound. They all collapsed where they were, foam appearing on their mouths or between mandibles, as, nearby, several birds fell out of the trees, including one of their targets.

Robin quickly gestured, and hands appeared around the target, entrapping it, while others grabbed the odd looking 'arm ball,' and tossed it towards them, where Zoro caught it. The rest of the crew looked at her, and she shrugged. "So long as I can see it, it was easy enough."

"Let's head back," Luffy said grumpily. He had not been pleased earlier when his attempts to climb the trees had been spoiled by the amount of poison oak and ivy up there. Every time he tried, the South Bird would lose him for just a second, flying faster and with more agility than it really should have had, leading him into one patch after another. It would then take all his skill to keep out of the ivy patches, by which time the South Bird was gone from his sight, and, as good a tracker as Luffy could be for things on the ground, he couldn't track birds worth a damn.

Because of that and his friends being equally inept at this task, the crew had been at this for nearly the entire night after having split up into teams. And then they came back together only to face still more attacks when they did. None of the attacks were more than bothersome, but they were all certainly that, especially to Makino and Nami. Nami had a normal girl's hate for all bugs, while Makino loathed moths in particular. "This was not how I wanted to spend my night!"

By the time they got back to their ship, the Resolve had been fully modified for its trip up the Knockup Stream. The two crews of the monkey men had worked seamlessly together to create two wings and a new figurehead for the ship.

"...Is that a chicken head?" Luffy growled, staring at thing at the front of the ship. Nami simply gaped, while Robin quickly grabbed Makino. The older woman looked positively incensed by this attack on what she considered acceptable ship design.

"You've got good eyes, brother!" shouted Masira.

"And those wings, they, they'll work, will they?" Zoro asked, cocking his head to one side as he stared at what had been done to their ship.

"That's correct!" shouted Shoujou.

"Are you telling me it will fly?" Chopper asked, staring in awe at the ship.

"That's right!" shouted Masira again, accompanied by many a shout of agreement from his crew.

"But why a chicken?" Luffy asked quizzically.

"What, do you have a problem with chickens? They're our favorite kind of bird," said Masira.

"Yeah, to eat, not to have their head on my ship's prow! I mean, I don't know much about art, but I know what I like!" Luffy shouted.

"Exactly!" Makino said, breaking free of a giggling Robin. "I understand the purpose of the wings and can accept their design, but that head is just wrong!"

"Enough of that, kid. You don't have time to poke holes at their admittedly horrible fashion sense. You'd be here all day," Montblanc said, shaking his head and staring at the South Bird Nami was carrying. "I see you caught one. Good."

"No," Nami said, holding up a finger. "This goes far beyond fashion sense."

"Whatever," Montblanc said, gesturing them toward the ship. "You need to get going if you're going to catch the Knockup Stream."

Sighing, Luffy nodded and held out his hand. "Thanks for the help, Montblanc," he said, grasping the other man's hand and squeezing firmly. "Once we get up there, do you want us to figure out some kind of way to tell you Sky Island exists somehow?"

“Do whatever you want, brat,” the man said, shaking Luffy's hand once and then letting go. “No skin off my back either way.”

“Is that an example of a Tsundere?” Robin asked, giggling as she passed Luffy by, heading to the ship with Makino.

“Probably,” Luffy said, falling in step with them before pausing. “But where did you even hear that term?”

“Where did you?” Robin asked loftily, her giggles turning into full blown laughter at Luffy's consternation.

“I don't know what that is, but I feel like I was just insulted!” Montblanc shouted. “Get going, you lot!”

“Yeah, yeah” Luffy said, hopping up onto the ship. “We'll be sure to show you that Sky Island is real, Montblanc, that your ancestor was telling the truth! Believe it!

Chuckling, Montblanc watched them go. “Damn brats. Still, it's been a long time since I saw someone with that kind of smile. I wonder if he'll change the world too?”

OOOOOOO

Unknown to any on the pirates on the island of Jaya, several hours away, trouble was closing in. In this case, trouble was in the form of a massive Marine galleon whose lookout had just spotted the island on the horizon. Instantly it began to move in that direction, slowly and with its sails mostly furled, so they could possibly take any pirate near the island by surprise.

OOOOOOO

At first the trip out to where the Knockup Stream would occur was peaceful enough, and, thanks to the South Bird, it was relatively easy to. “I can't believe this bird,” Luffy said, twisting the neck of the South Bird lightly to one side and then watching as it flipped back the other way. “I mean, I'm all for discovering new things and wild and crazy stuff, but a bird who can only face south? What the heck is the point of that?”

"I would think it was obvious," Nami said with a huff, smirking as she smacked Luffy on the shoulder. "We're using it the way the bird probably does on its own: if you always know where one direction is, you can always find the others. In fact, I bet with one of these you could even try to make a map for the Grand Line like you normally can do with the rest of the world."

"Ah, but you would have to have enough supplies to get you from one island to the other in the direction you chose to go," Robin cautioned, also looking at the bird.

Huffing grumpily, the bird twisted its own head away, muttering something under its breath. "Bwah, brah, rrah."

"Chopper?" Luffy asked, looking down at the small doctor.

Chopper nodded, shifting his face once more to look something like a street tough. "He says, 'Hah, that's what you know! Watch, I'll twist another way, and I'll throw you all off course.'"

Luffy nodded and looked back at the bird, crossing his arms. "All right, let's see you do it."

The bird muttered under its breath once more and continued to point in that direction. But as they watched, it could only keep it up for a few seconds before abruptly twisting back to straight south.

"That's what I thought," Luffy said with a chuckle.

The Resolve continued on its way, following the two monkey ships, with Zoro taking a turn up in the crow's nest with the others manning the sails, save for Nami. She went to work trying to figure out how the additions messed with the ship's handling. Zoro was up there with the spyglass, staring all around them on watch for trouble along with the watchmen of the other ships. He saw a few sails out by the horizon, but he didn't make a particular note of them until he saw a few directly ahead.

At Masira and his brother's orders, the Resolve slowed, the crew furling the sails and coming to a halt between one moment and the next as the wind died down for a moment. As they did, the two monkey ships moved away slightly, their captains arguing about how long it would take for the Knockup stream to start and whether or not the Resolve should anchor itself.

But Zoro, still staring at the one set of sails out there, frowned as they multiplied and grew. "Captain, I think you better get up here," Zoro said.

Luffy looked up, then shrugged and leaped upwards, planting a hand on the middlemost mast, then flipping himself upwards to land on top of the mainmast. "What is it?" he asked as he crouched there.

Zoro wordlessly handed over the spyglass, and Luffy used it to scan the horizon, scowling as he saw what Zoro had. "What the heck? That looks like four, five ships out there, spreading out as they come towards us?" Turning to one side he saw four more, straight ahead, all spread out, then, twisiting around the other way, he saw three more there. *What the heck?* "We have incoming, everyone! Battle stations! Get the cannons run out! Makino, you take the tiller! Nami, you and Robin woman the guns!"

"What is it?" Nami shouted, looking a little fearful. She had a lot of trust in her crew, but that really didn't matter much when the cannons and, more importantly, the wood shrapnel, were flying.

"We have what looks like the entire population of Mock Town pirates coming out after us for some reason, and from all sides, somehow." Luffy said. "Was Bellamy really that popular a figure?"

"Going from his personality, I would have said, heck no," Nami muttered, biting at her finger. "There must be something else going on here."

OOOOOOO

"Captain, we spotted a sail to the south southeast, but it's not on a direct course towards the island we were originally heading for."

"Is it waving a pirate flag?"

"It's a pirate ship, ma'am, but it isn't the Straw Hats. Hold on, wait. It's more than one pirate ship out there."

"An exodus of some sort?" Captain Hina's first mate asked, scratching at his chin.

"Or something," Hina said, shrugging her shoulders. "Still, our duty is clear. Even if the Resolve isn't among them, smashing that many pirate ships at once, especially if they're up to no good, takes priority. Hina irritated. The hunt will have to wait."

With that and a final nod to her first mate, she turned away and he began to bawl out orders as he raced down into the ship. "Action stations!" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "All men to action stations! Gun crews, to your stations!"

"Sail crews, put on full sail! We'll want to catch them up, if we can!" Hina smirked, wildly tossing her cigarette over the side, roaring out, "Hina excited! It's time for some hunting, boys!" She was answered by a roar from her crew.

OOOOOOO

"What are you going to do?" Luffy shouted over the waves towards the other two ships.

"Well fight with you, of course!" shouted Masira, raising his hands in the air. "This is our territory, after all, we only let other pirates on Jaya on sufferance!"

While Luffy rolled his eyes at that, the other monkey man spoke up. "Indeed, indeed. They need to be shown the error of their ways immediately! Little minnows shouldn't try to gang up on a shark."

"Just remember, you can't move from that spot if you want to catch the Knockup Stream," said the first one. "You're in the direct center of it now, but if you move from that spot you'll be on one of the sides, and not only will you be unable to ride it, but the Knockup Stream might just smash you to pieces. Unless you want to miss it entirely and try another time."

"So scary," Chopper muttered, staring over the side.

Sanji patted him lightly on the head. "Remember, you're a Straw Hat monster now," he said when Chopper looked up, giving him a grin around his cigar and a thumbs up. "Whatever happens, we'll handle it together."

At that, Chopper stiffened and nodded, patting his chest with a hoof. "You can rely on me!"

"Well said, the both of you," Luffy said as he leaped down from on high. "Nami, can you tell us if we're likely to see any change in the weather?"

Nami frowned looking up and all around for a moment, then thinking hard, biting one of her knuckles again. "I don't think so. The sea around here is of almost a little too calm,

though that could presage the Knockup Stream. We're not going to get rain or any more wind than we already are. We should be able to stay in position." Nami was worried about the incoming ships, for certain, but she couldn't do anything about them. The Knockup Stream, while more dangerous, perhaps, was a navigational hazard, and she could do something about that, and it was a lot less scary than trying to get away and facing a fight against the small fleet coming their way.

"But will that last if we take a cannon shot?" Luffy asked.

"It should," Nami said with a shrug. "This ship is a schooner, but it's still big enough to take cannonball shots without being pushed too far out of position. And if we anchor both of our forward cable and back, we can create a stationary platform."

"Do it," Luffy ordered.

"We might not have enough warning of the Knockup Stream to untie, though," Nami warned.

"Zoro," Luffy shouted, "Stay near the aft of the ship! I'll stay towards the front. When it comes time, we'll just cut the cables. Sanji, that'll leave you to protect the port and Chopper starboard."

"Works," Zoro huffed, leaping down to take that position.

Luffy passed by him with Geppo, ascending higher in the air than the top of their crow's nest. He frowned as he saw two others ships out there, but they were too far for him to make out, and he had forgotten the spyglass down below. "The first few are almost within cannon range," he said as he landed back on the crow's nest, shouting down to the rest of the crew. "Chopper, Sanji, remember, we need those wings, so protect them in particular. If it's a choice between them and the side of the ship, the ship takes the hit."

"What? But, but what about the ladies?!" Sanji shouted.

"You'll protect us more by making sure we aren't sunk by the Knockup Stream, Sanji-kun!" Nami shouted as she made to go below after dropping the second of their anchors, which was situated forward. "Please, only you can make sure we'll get out of here safely!"

"Hai, Nami-swan!" Sanji replied, twirling in place before leaping to land on top of one of the wings in question.

"You should be ashamed of yourself, manipulating that poor young man so," Robin said mildly, her lips twitching in amusement even as she moved to stand in the center of the

gun deck. Around them hundreds of hands and nearly an equal number of eyes appeared as she prepared the guns, running them out one at a time.

"I might be if it wasn't to make certain we get out of here alive, and if it wasn't so easy," Nami shot back, racing to the second cannon on the port side and heaving a cannon into it followed by a bag of gunpowder.

Soon the first of the pirates came into cannon range, whereupon they immediately began to fire on the Resolve. "Hold your fire," Luffy shouted from where he stood right on top of the chicken head, a few cannon balls plunking into the ocean. "Hold fire until they're closer! Let the monkeys do the work for a bit."

As he had predicted, those first shots were horrible. None of them even came close to the ship. At the same time the two monkey ships moved off as one, moving towards the incoming vessels and closing in from port. All of the ships Luffy could see from where he was standing looked to be the same size as the Resolve.

On the port side of the ship, where the two monkey pirates had been, that attempt to encircle was disrupted quickly. A vicious broadside engagement began there between three other pirate vessels and the two larger monkey vessels. But they weren't just larger, they were tougher too, and, watching them, Luffy had no doubt that their allies would win that match up.

But the rest of the pirates closed in, and Luffy could eventually start hearing their shouts over the sound of cannon fire as they finally closed into truly dangerous range. Some of them were howling about money and gold, and he shook his head. "Hey, Zoro, I think you didn't do a good enough job on those pirate crews that tried to seize our ship. They're shouting about gold and stuff."

"I don't think so," Zoro said from the back. "Captain, we've got real trouble here."

"And we have trouble over here too," Chopper shouted as the first cannonballs impacted the ship, blowing splinters apart. He blocked one that would have hit the starboard wing but had to let two others through. Sanji blocked one, but the other hit.

The ship returned fire, the girls below manning the canons, with Makino calling out targets from where she was in the crow's nest, there being no point to her standing at the tiller just yet. One of the attacking ships on the starboard took a heavy hammering, but their ship didn't have as many canons on it as a normal ship their size would, and the pirates kept on coming, intent on closing to boarding range even as Sanji switched sides entirely, grateful for the monkey men taking out the ships coming from their port.

Soon another round of cannon fire was exchanged, and, thanks to Makino's precise orders, the already battered ship began to sink, holed near the water line. A second lost its way when its rigging was torn to pieces by her rifle fire, Zoro and Luffy lashing out at long range with their disparate air attacks.

Behind them, however, there was the real trouble that Chopper was talking about. Just behind the other pirates, just coming over the horizon, in fact, was a massive galleon, a real warship with the Marine mark on its sails. Its heavier guns fired as it came, sailing closer and closer. The ship had full sails on so that it could close the distance with the ostensibly faster sailing pirate vessels.

And, as Luffy looked, he could barely make out a single head of pink hair racing here and there. "It looks as if Hina's over there. Thankfully, I didn't see any sign of Smokey, at least," he said, shaking his head.

"Yeah," Zoro muttered, not even turning in that direction. "But there's even more trouble over here."

Even as he smashed aside a few cannonballs, Luffy turned in that direction while Zoro turned his own attention back to a few cannonballs coming their way, slicing them into pieces while hopping in the air.

Scowling, Luffy saw what Zoro was talking about. It was another large galleon, not quite as large as the Marine vessel, but large enough, even though it was built to look very crude, as if the vessel had just been made out of huge tree trunks like a massive log raft. But there were dozens of forward facing cannons, which were already firing as the ship came towards them.

Luffy growled, leaping back aft and landing next to Zoro. Cupping his hands, Luffy roared out towards the incoming ship and the large fat man who was sitting on the front of it. "I thought we had an understanding!"

"I was willing to let you go before I found out your new bounty!" the man shouted back, laughing loudly. "After that, how could I not come after you? ZHahhahhah!"

"Eighty-four million is worth the punishment you're going to take here?" Luffy shouted back.

"So you don't know," the man replied, holding up the bounty posters one after another. "Monkey D. Luffy, you're worth a hundred and thirty million! Pirate Hunter Zoro, you're worth eighty-five million! Hell cook Sanji, eighty million! Devil Child Nico Robin, seventy-nine million...and unknown female pirate, ten million."

“Unknown female pirate,” Nami muttered, having heard that despite being down in the ship’s gun deck. “Should I feel insulted or happy that they don't know my name?”

“It depends on whether or not you like chibi-fied pictures, I think,” Robin said, having created an eye on the aft of the ship to see the wanted posters. “They're still using a deformed picture for Sanji too.”

“A hundred and thirty million,” Luffy said, thrusting a hand up in the air. “How ya like that!?”

“Eighty five million’s not so bad, but I bet my next increase will be better than yours,” Zoro muttered, scowling a bit. Then he absentmindedly sliced a cannonball coming towards their ship in half as he hopped back into the air.

“Hah, you wish! I’m the captain of this crew, Zoro, and that means my bounty will always be larger!” Luffy shot back.

“Eighty million’s okay, but God dammit, why haven't they replaced that picture!” Sanji muttered, raced over to take a look at his picture.

“I don’t know. I think it suits you perfectly, Aho-cook,” Zoro replied.

Makino's voice roared out just then from the crow’s next. “Excuse me, gentlemen! We are in the middle of a fight, so please save your dick measuring contests for later!”

The three young men looked suitably chastened at that, and Sanji raced back to his previous position. Luffy, however, stood by Zoro, his anger flaring as he smirked, cracking his knuckles. The other pirate vessels wouldn't amount to much of a fight. Once they got close enough, Zoro and he could deal with them. In fact, the only reason why they weren't already doing so was the monkeys’ warning that the Knockup Stream could come at any moment. “If you want my bounty, you come in trying to take it!”

A second later Hina's voice roared out over the waves and cannon fire. “Hina angry! You Pirates shouldn’t forget about me! Straw Hat Luffy, you are under arrest!”

As the giant Marine galleon moved forward, two of the pirate ships it had been attacking from directly astern slowly sank into the waters, and she began to bellow orders as one other tried desperately to pile on sail and turn away, its sides ravaged and obviously out of the fight. “Port side, target that large, primitive looking galleon! Starboard side, target those other two larger vessels to the front of the Resolve! All cannons fire at will and keep the ship on this course!”

From then on there were no more words exchanged as the ships continued to exchange fire. One more pirate vessel went down to the Resolve, while two more couldn't get by the monkey vessels, pulled aside from their main objective to join that snarling bit of combat thanks to Masira's sonic attacks. None of those vessels had sunk just yet, but that wasn't for lack of trying. The two monkey men had pulled off five of the attacking pirate vessels towards them, and, if not for the arrival of the Marines, that would probably have been more than enough to even the odds against the Resolve, given the nature of its crew, except for the fact that its crew had their feet nailed to the ground, waiting for the Knockup Stream.

"Dammit!" Luffy muttered, smashing a cannon ball back towards the large ungainly vessel where it impacted hard on one its oddly shaped prow, shattering the wood and silencing one of the cannons there. Despite all he and the others could do, their ship was taking a pounding, and he was worried that the splinters would hurt Nami, Makino, or Robin badly.

In fact, both Makino and Robin had taken injuries by this point, but thanks to Robin and her hands, the flying bits of debris hadn't hurt them severely just yet. She had eyes everywhere now, down below, and hands ready and waiting to push people out of the way. It wasn't elegant, but it worked, although it probably wouldn't if this fight continued. Makino hadn't timed her use of Tekkai, and even used her Haki a time or two in order to take musket shots, but none of the attacking ships could aim up toward the crow's nest.

For their part, the larger enemy galleon had taken a lot of fire from the Marine ship, but seemed to simply ignore it, not firing back. Luffy wondered why that was, but didn't really have time to get high enough to look. Nor was it firing back against the Marine ship, though that, at least, might be because it had all its cannons facing forward from the front of the 'log raft.'

To one side, Chopper grunted, taking another cannonball on his Guard Point and shaking his head. "They're going to overwhelm us soon!" he shouted. If there was fear in his voice, none of his listeners commented.

"Yeah, I can see that," Luffy muttered, staring at the Marine vessel as it came closer and closer. "Dammit, who would've thought coming out here early would be a bad thing!"

On his ship, Blackbeard laughed, shouting down into the ship. "That's right, Augur! Pour it on; we're nearly there. Once we're close enough to grapple, this fight is over!"

He twisted his hand in the direction of the Marine ship, and a cannonball changed direction, coming towards his hand where it was absorbed into a black vortex once more. With that threat dealt with, he glared up at the sky. "What the heck? What's with the clouds?"

Unseen by anyone, the sky had clouded over severely above them, almost looking like a solid form now. The only one who had noticed anything unusual was Nami, and she stumbled up onto the deck as fast as she could. She had taken some hits to one of her legs, and a piece of splintered bark was stuck in her ankle, with another near her knee. "Everyone, it's time! I can feel the water shifting below us; the Knockup Stream is coming!"

Luffy, who had basically taken over the port side from Sanji, who had then moved to help Chopper, nodded. He instantly turned and lashed out hard at the chain of the back anchor with a sharp Rankyaku. At the front of the ship, Zoro did the same with one of his swords before both men hopped their way back onto the deck of the Resolve.

The next few moments were tense, with Luffy and his crew now even more on the defensive and taking more punishment. The last of the other pirate vessels had broken off, too badly battered to matter much, but that left the Blackbeard Pirates and the Marines, closing. It was the Marines who were the closest, though. They hadn't taken as much fire as from the pirates, having come upon them from behind as they did, and their sails had been set to full for the entire fight, pushing them forward faster than the other vessel could go.

"Here it comes!" Nami shouted as he stared over the side of the ship, seeing a boiling pressure building up in the water underneath them.

Luffy nodded, then roared out "Rankyaku!" as he aimed to kick towards the Marine ship, aiming to cut one of its masts.

However, Hina leaped into the air, intersecting the attack with one of her locks, but not enough. A piece of the attack sliced into the galleon's other mast's sails, slicing them away cleanly. That slowed them just enough so that, instead of slamming into the Resolve's center, it struck forward. This pushed the ship off its former position at an angle, but the troops ready with grapnels faced Luffy's Rankyaku at close range and Zoro's air attacks. They ducked backwards, the ship's side and many of their grapnels sliced into deeply, while Hina could only block so many.

They were still alive, but they weren't in position to do anything when Robin suddenly shouted. "Mil Fleur: Push!" From the side of the Resolve thousands of hands appeared to merge into one giant hand, thrusting out hard against the Marine ship.

An instant later, the Knockup Stream at last fired off. The sea below the two ships and right before the large pirate galleon boiled and suddenly blasted upwards with all the force of a cannon the size of an island.

“Holy shitttt!” Luffy shouted, grabbing onto the side of the ship as it started to stand directly upright on the spout of water. They weren’t on the stream’s direct center, the middle of the spout, though, and the ship slowly began to slide down it.

Nami, feeling the wind in her face, grinned for a moment despite the pain of her leg, then cried out. “Everyone to the sails!”

The boys all looked at her in shock, and she grinned. “This is a stream, and any stream can be navigated. And who's the navigator on this ship?!”

Sanji grinned and shouted, “Nami-swan is!”

At the same time Luffy laughed, leaping upwards towards the sails as he roared out, “That's my navigator!”

Nearby, the Marine vessel was having a far worse time of it. Even if its head on charge had smashed the pirate vessel out of its former position, it too was well off the center of the Knockup Stream, and it was far heavier. It also didn't have the wings the Resolve did. Within seconds it was in danger of falling off the Knockup Stream entirely.

Hina, however, saw this and raced to the center of her deck. “Open Iron Maiden!” she howled, her hands flashing out. Two strands of metal locks lashed out from her legs, clamping her like a limpet to the main mast. From her hands came two large metal waves, as much like wings made out of restraints as she could make them. Portions spread out along the banister as the rest flowed out, trying to act like the wings like she’d seen on the pirate vessel. *I'd wondered about those. Now I know what they're doing, or rather, a portion of it, anyway! Can't think about it now; must save the ship.*

“Trim the sails, cut away that sail that was cut and its fellow. Navigator, listen to the navigator on the pirate ship and correct for our position!” she shouted out even as her body began to cry out in agony at the strain she was under. Locking herself down to the galleon and creating wings at the same time was far beyond what she normally did with her powers, and worse, it was also tugging at her body, which she could not change entirely into shackles. “Hina determined! We have to survive this before we can restart this fight!”

“Yes, ma'am!” shouted the Marines all around her.

They were scared but took courage from their captain’s orders just as the rest of the Straw Hats followed Nami’s. Below the two ships, the ocean started to disappear behind them as they kept climbing this impromptu stream to heaven, ascending now completely perpendicular to the ground below.

End Chapter

To me, Jaya is only interesting in that it is a stepping-stone to what I feel is one of the two best arcs in One Piece, Skypiea. Not a single fight in Jaya canon was at all interesting, and much of it only really happened because Nami demanded that Luffy and Zoro not fight. Not going to happen here for a myriad of reasons that Luffy spoke of briefly. However, Blackbeard is, of course, an interesting character in many ways, and I hope I showed his conniving, planning side here as well as his very selective concept of a pirate's code. Also hope that it doesn't take as long before this story wins in the small story poll again, LOL. As always, please review!