

Um, a word of warning, with Luffy knowing Geppo there is very little that could be done to make the whole climbing Drum Island thing be as dramatic as in canon. So I decided to do away with the drama and add a bit of ultraviolence!

Stallion of the Line 9: Kings Crumble before a Stallion's Hooves

With Nami watching over the Log Pose Luffy and the rest of the crew piled on the canvas as much as they could, which for a schooner rig was quite a lot. They practically cut through the water, possibly going as fast as thirty knots. Which sounded good, Luffy thought to himself as he stood on the port side of the mainmast's topgallant, if you forgot what they were actually trying to do: get Vivi to an island that had a doctor before she fully succumbed to the poison.

Makino had taken over looking after Vivi. She was hopeful that she could at least sweat some of the poison out of Vivi's system for now. Sanji was helping her, feeding Vivi spicy drinks which might make her sweat some. But otherwise there was little any of them could do. Makino had some medical knowledge, but that was for wounds, dealing with gangrene and knowing about scurvy or other issues of that nature, not poisons. And Nami knew even less.

Looking down at the ginger haired girl's bowed head, Luffy frowned. Nami hadn't spoken to anyone since they had realized Vivi was poisoned. She seemed to feel guilty about having allowed Vivi to be injured. Which was silly in Luffy's opinion. It had been a fight; Nami wasn't experienced enough to watch everything in a fight like that, and it had been Luffy's orders that split up the crew. If it was anyone's fault it was his.

"Stop that," Robin said from nearby. Luffy turned to her, and watched as she calmly flipped a page in her book before looking up at him from where she reclined on a chair she had taken from somewhere inside the ship in the crow's nest. Why she was up here in the first place Luffy didn't know. She had joined him about ten minutes ago, but hadn't spoken since. *Maybe she just likes being high up?*

“You were about to blame yourself for Vivi’s injuries,” she said, and then before he could ask how she knew that she continued before looking down at her book again. “You were frowning, staring down at Nami and then at the doorway leading into the cafeteria. It was rather obvious.”

“Shouldn’t I feel guilty?” Luffy asked quietly, looking away. “I’m the captain. It’s my responsibility to watch out for my crew.”

“No it isn’t. A pirate crew doesn’t work like that. On a pirate crew you have to watch out for yourself first, then anyone else. Your decision to split the crew was the correct one to save the civilians. If your objective had been to destroy the Hawkins pirates then staying together would’ve been a better bet, but it wasn’t,” Robin replied somewhat clinically. “Your first mate asked you about whether or not you actually are a pirate, and I have to say that I understand his perspective.”

“You didn’t complain about the battle when I committed us to it,” Luffy drawled, shaking his head.

“No I did not, for reasons of my own,” Robin replied calmly, flipping another page.

“Although honestly, I was surprised that you were able to defeat Hawkins so quickly,” she went on, looking up at Luffy once more when she hit a line break. “He was known as a rising rookie much like yourself before your meeting. I would’ve expected the battle to be long, drawn out, and excessively violent, but you handled him almost easily, didn’t you?” She wasn’t certain about that, but considering that he had not been injured much and that the battle was rather short Robin felt that it was a good guess.

“I was just a bad matchup for Hawkins,” Luffy said with a shrug. “His Devil Fruit ability allowed him to absorb and sort of displace damage to his voodoo victims, but I think that aspect of his power took some time to set up and a living subject. But if a person could do a lot of killing type damage quickly, they can negate that easily, which is what I did. His Devil Fruit based attacks were okay, but slow or simply useless against someone like me. If he had been able to use that voodoo stuff on me directly that would’ve been a much better, harder fight.”

"I know that you know the Busoshoku Haki. Is that how you did so much damage?"

"No, and that technique isn't even the most versatile of my tricks either," Luffy said bluntly. "I have a speed technique that I use to do a lot of damage."

Luffy gestured with one hand which suddenly disappeared to Robin's senses as the sound of ripping thunder hit her ears and her hair moved in a unseen wind, separate from the wind pushing their schooner along. "It allowed me to do a lot of damage quickly every time I was able to get through his defenses, and he simply couldn't keep up with me."

"I see. And if that had not worked?"

"Keep my distance, use Rankyakus on him until I figure out his weakness, close, target weakness, end the fight. Or fall back on the old faithful, shift the fight slowly through the city until we were on the wharf then somehow get Hawkins into the water."

"You had it all planned out then?" Robin asked, quirking an eyebrow at this display of tactical acumen.

"Yes and no. In fights like that, you can't really take the time to think things through. Everything has to happen on the instinctual level or you lose precious seconds. Instead, it's more about instinct. You train your mind to swiftly see openings or patterns in your opponent, then to take advantage of them. Training beats actual thinking in a battle like that."

Robin nodded thoughtfully, then tossed out a few scenarios to see how Luffy would deal with them, watching him all the while. It was interesting that such a young man was also such an extremely well-trained and **experienced** fighter. He might've said that it was training, but there was no chance of it simply being training. It was also clear that he was still holding things back.

At the same time, Luffy left her with a bit of a quandary. She had started this journey with the firm belief that she should keep her options open and not betray Crocodile beyond a certain level so that she could later return to his side in order to

fulfill her own dream: that of finding the True History on the history poneglyphs. Crocodile thought the two of them were after the same thing, after all.

And while knowing where she stood with him was a bad thing in that Robin knew Crocodile was planning to kill her the instant she was no longer necessary, she also knew that until then Robin was safe. Crocodile would need her to read the poneglyph. *And that is what it's all about, fulfilling my dream. If I can find the True History, I can die a happy woman, and the world will be a better place for it.*

On the other hand, she was also a very good analyst of people, and there were both mysteries and positives about being around Luffy. First of all, he was interesting, sharp on his feet in both conversation and battle, likable, and in no way a dominating sort of personality like Crocodile tried to be. Luffy was welcoming and seemed to actually consider her something of a friend even if he wasn't blind to the fact that Robin was using him.

And if he was not understating his abilities the young man also had a decent chance of defeating Crocodile with or without her help. Robin believed he was not understating them. She'd already seen that her own abilities were not enough to stop him, he had an instinctual response to attacks that made any direct assault on him moot, her ability being slightly too slow and not strong enough to get through his defenses. And he knew Busoshoku Haki. Crocodile had seemed both incensed and mildly concerned about that.

He also listened to Robin, valued his crew, and was just...a generally likable person! That aspect put him not only above Crocodile, but above all the other pirates Robin had to deal with over her lifetime. *So it comes down to whether I would be able to achieve my dream with his help, or at least with his connivance, or whether I should remain with Crocodile?* That truly was the only question in Robin's mind, and she simply could not come to an answer for it, which forced her to keep her options open as much as she could.

On the other hand, Robin truly loved mysteries. It was part and parcel of what had driven her to be the historian and archaeologist that she was and had gotten her into trouble many times both before and since her original training in such back in the Tree of Knowledge.

And there were mysteries about Luffy, things that just didn't add up when you put them all together. If they had been about both Luffy and Makino, Robin would have simply thought that the two of them were keeping secrets from their past, which would have been normal. This was purely about Luffy, and they were tiny, little things she had noticed.

Phrases that he used, like that 'second star to the right and straight on to morning' line back when they left Cactus Island, which sounded like a quote to Robin but not from any book she'd ever read. That didn't really mean anything of course, she wasn't so foolish as to believe that she had read every book in existence. But there had been others like that, and none of the crew seemed to have recognized them either.

Then there was the curse. Robin had never **ever** read or heard of a Devil Fruit power reacting so strangely after the fact. She had heard of the individual who had the power to change genders, or rather hormones, of course. He (or she, the jury was out on that score when it came to Ivankov) had been a major revolutionary officer at one time, and at one point Robin had thought about joining up with the Revolutionaries, though she had eventually decided against it. Robin was unwilling to suborn her dream to someone else's objectives. All she wanted to do was learn the truth of the Void Century, not use it to shatter the World Government as she knew the Revolutionaries would have tried to.

But the curse now, **that** was highly unusual. There was simply no scientific way that the hormone curse could possibly be the cause of later changes of sex linked to an application of water. That kind of thing sounded like an entirely new Devil Fruit almost. That meant that something more was going on there. What that more could be she had no idea, but Robin was willing to go along with the cover that Luffy had created since it had the veneer of sense if not reality.

But even beyond that, there was something else that bothered her. At times Luffy acted...not old precisely, but older than his years. This was something beyond simply combat experience or having a harsh childhood. Robin was all too aware of her own harsh childhood, and knew the look it gave people. Indeed, the only ones aboard this ship who didn't have that kind of look were Vivi and Makino. But Luffy sometimes looked as if he was an older man in a younger body when he was talking about training

with the others, as if he had done it all before. Yet he still was also somewhat naïve towards women. His reactions to her and Nami were not feigned.

All of this didn't add up, therefore the mystery.

Robin was roused out of her thoughts as Luffy spoke up again. "What about your own abilities? Your hands and such were a major help in the first act of that fight, and I understand that you're pretty nimble too?"

"I'm certainly not on the level of the Princess," Robin replied quickly, laughing lightly. "That girl is astonishingly light on her feet. I thought at first that she had already developed Observation haki, but it is simply speed and acrobatic ability. But yes, my power is the Hana-Hana fruit," she said, waving her hand in the air as several forearms appeared from her elbow for a moment before disappearing, leaving little tiny petals behind in the air.

"What is with the petals?" Luffy asked, seemingly diverted for a moment as he leaped into the crow's nest staring closely at the petals before they disappeared.

"I...actually have no idea, though I think there are other Devil Fruit powers that leave behind little after images like that," Robin said with a shrug. "What the cause behind them is I don't know."

"And is there any limit to what you can copy?" He held up a hand before Robin could speak. "I'm not asking about weaknesses or anything like that, I'm just wondering about from how far away you can use your powers and anything else you want to tell me. I'll understand if you don't want to tell me everything, though."

Robin thought hard for a moment, then shrugged. She'd already realized that her power really wouldn't stop Luffy. It could probably work on Sanji, Zoro, and the others, but not on the captain. He was simply too fast, his instincts for being attacked too good. *In fact, I could turn this into my advantage and test those reflexes. Besides, he's probably already figured out how to fight me anyway.*

With that in mind Robin brought up her up hands together in front of her chest. She conjured up her power, and eyes appeared on the masthead behind her, heading up towards where the Straw Hat flag was flying proudly above them. Feet soon appeared, wiggling little toes for a moment in a circle all around the banister of

the crow's nest. "I can conjure my limbs, eyes, and other body parts like this," she said, her eyes still closed and concentrating on her powers.

"There is no limit to the type of object or individual that I can target to make my limbs appear on them." A second later, a hand appeared on Luffy's inner thigh, before immediately disappearing as Robin had felt something underneath Luffy's pant leg. *Oh my, he's quite a **big** boy.*

She flushed slightly at that but covered it with a tickle attack, noting that Luffy actually hadn't been able to dodge that, and nodding thoughtfully to herself. *So, it's only actual attacks he feels? It seems it is a very specific type of observation haki, then, or perhaps an advanced form? But I've seen him unable to dodge attacks from Nami too... Odd. I suppose that could be a personal choice, but I think it could be another sense entirely.*

Luffy eventually recovered from the tickle attack, shaking his head as the hands all over him disappeared. "We-, hah, hah, well, your hands and your eyes for certain make you a valued member of this little crew. We wouldn't have been able to pull off that attack without you for sure."

"Yes," Robin said flatly, turning back to her book. "My powers do make me quite useful, don't they?"

"I don't like that word," Luffy said, leaning over and actually putting a hand on top of the book she was reading, forcing Robin to look up at him, her eyes caught by his. "It makes it sound as if you're a tool or something. You're a person, not a thing, not an object."

"That is often what pirate or marine captains see their crew as," Robin replied bluntly. "Tools, useful tools occasionally, but still tools that can be discarded, traded, or left by the wayside so long as what occurs serves the captain's goals either long or short term."

"Not on this crew," Luffy said firmly. "This crew is a family." He paused, smirking. "A weird, dysfunctional family where some level of insanity is the norm, but still a family. And in that light," Luffy said thoughtfully, still looking at her with his hand over the pages of her book. "I think I want to see if you could use armor haki. That would make you even more dangerous."

"I'm not part of your crew," Robin said, moving his hand from her book but not looking away from his eyes. "You know I'm using you, and I have tried to keep a distance between us in the event that our goals diverge and I must leave to achieve my own ends. Why would you help me get stronger?"

"Because at the moment you are part of my crew, even if you're a temporary part like Vivi. And because I know what it's like to be lonely, to be alone with the whole world against you. All of us on this crew do in a way, I suppose. Though for my money I think Nami had the hardest time of it."

Robin stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. "You're a fool," she said softly, "a stone cold fool." *Let that be a lesson to you, Robin. Remember that other people are watching you too. Dammit, I should have noticed that.*

"Maybe," Luffy said with a grin on his face. "After all, what sort of person would think that trying to become the Pirate King is a dream for the sane?"

"That I have to concede," Robin said with a chuckle before resolutely returning to her book.

The two of them fell quiet as Luffy turned back to the sea, staring out and ahead of them as the ship continued on its way.

Early the next morning the three boys were on watch, with Luffy at the tiller and Sanji working on the sails, replacing one of them. They lost half of the topgallant sail and royal sail last night, torn apart during a squall, tearing the canvas which they had tightened as much as possible to get the most speed out of the ship. Such a thing was risky, of course, since sails could be torn apart easily in winds that came at them as this one had. They had also lost another one, torn to pieces by hail during an earlier storm.

But it was the only way they could go faster unless, as Nami had shouted during the rain, "You guys get out and push!" The fact that Zoro and the then-redheaded Luffy had actually seemed to be considering it had made her hit them both upside the head. But thanks to the grateful populace of the town they'd saved from the Hawkins Pirates they had canvas aplenty in the hold along with food, so such measures were unnecessary.

Zoro was up in the crow's nest while Nami and Makino were both inside at the moment. The Log Pose was on Luffy's forearm for now because Sanji had convinced Nami to head to bed. She had been awake most of the time they had been speeding towards the island where they met with Hawkins Pirates, and had tried to stay up all night too, only to nearly fall asleep at the tiller.

The older girls were both still awake inside watching over Vivi, intending to switch out with the boys at some point so they could get some rest. They didn't know what kind of reception they would receive at the next island, and Makino's prognosis on Vivi's health was grim enough that they knew she wouldn't survive for long, so it was better to be ready for anything.

Despite that, all three boys were in a cheerful mood as Sanji leaped down from the crow's nest to land next to Luffy, staring at the Log Pose which was now pointing straight ahead as Zoro raced aloft to take his place. Luffy's breath came out in little puffs as he exchanged a high five with the chef. "We've entered a new weather system for sure. That's two hours by the glass of winter weather.

That meant they were getting close to an actual island. Every island in the Grand Line had a single season; spring, summer, autumn or winter; which dominated and created an area around it that showed this. Once you entered an area where the weather remained unchanged for a few hours, you knew you were near an island somewhere, though of course even with that it was quite hard to find an island unless you had a Log Pose or were an extremely good navigator.

"Um, Luffy... I see something weird out there," Zoro shouted from the Crow's nest, where he was using the spyglass to keep a lookout around the ship.

The two men by the tiller exchanged a glance, and Luffy shook his head, shouting back. "You're going to have to be a little more specific than that, Zoro."

"Weird for the Grand Line, I mean," Zoro explained patiently. "There's a weird guy out there dressed like a chess piece, and he's... He looks to be standing on the water. Oh, and he's seen us."

Luffy and Sanji exchanged a glance, then Luffy leaped up to join his first mate up on the crow's nest. There was indeed an individual out there dressed somewhere

between a clown and a chess piece, and he was indeed standing on the water. “How exactly is he doing that? That would be a damn cool technique to learn...”

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“They seem to be pirates, Wapol-sama. They've got a decent ship, but don't seem to have that large acrew,” a voice coming out from a tube into a dim, barely lit room said. “I have spotted only three young men on the ship at present. They also seem to have a giant turtle or tortoise on deck, along with a duck.”

“Ma, a turtle. It's been a while since I've eaten a turtle. Lovely! I suppose since they're in the area they also might have an Eternal Pose for Drum Island. We're getting nowhere out here even if we're able to stay within the island's weather system. Raise us up. I want some turtle soup!”

“Bring up the ship! His Majesty has commanded it,” another voice shouted, answered by many others.

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The ocean around the Straw Hats' ship; which was still unnamed the crew not having come up with a name they all liked and now with Vivi's injury not caring, began to lurch and rise as if something else was rising up beneath it. This quickly proved to be the case.

The schooner first rose upon, then was pushed down the sluicing water as a giant circular ship rose from the depths. It was at least seven stories tall from where the keel entered the water to the deck, and it was covered in metal plates from the deck up. The plates made for a dome over the ship, holding the masts and deck within it, and as the Straw Hat pirates watched the metal plates recessed down the ship's side.

As they did so a figurehead on a large beam was winched loudly out from the ship showing a hippo's head. At the same time a pirate flag was pulled up the mainmast's flag pole beside the sad looking guy dressed like a jester who had apparently been on lookout. It had a skull wearing a crown and a metal lower jaw with a tongue sticking out to one side in the foreground, and the regular crossbones and black background.

"Okay," Luffy said as their ship settled once more, holding up a card with an 8.5 on it. "You lose points for the hippo face because it is damn ugly. Yet while slow, that **was** a robotic-type transformation and a decent entrance too."

Zoro scoffed, holding up a page with a six on it. "I'd rate it a 6. Size isn't everything, and the entire ship screams overcompensation to me."

Instead of following up on that giant opening from his favorite target, Sanji shook his head and held up another piece of paper, this one with a seven on it. "The whole ship isn't attractive. No woman gave any input into that ship for certain. Even if it has a transformation, a submersible needs to be streamlined, not wallow like a pig, or a hippo, as the case may be."

"How dare you?!" shouted the sad jester that had been on the lookout, a tic mark appearing on his forehead. "How dare mere peons like you make fun of the aesthetics of a king?!"

"A king?" Luffy asked, pointing up at the flag. "I thought he was a pirate captain. Pirate captains do make fun of each other all the time. The world would be a hell of a lot more boring if that wasn't the case."

At this point the three women who were still able to move came out on deck, Nami nearly snorting anger as people began to rappel down the larger ship's sides onto their deck. "What the fuck is going on!?"

"That rocking nearly had the princess out of her bed," Robin said somewhat more coldly than she would normally speak. While Robin wasn't close to the blue haired girl, she did rather like the child's spunk and did not want to see Vivi overly injured unless it served her own ends.

“Wow, you guys really don't take this whole pirate thing seriously, do you?” said a large, exceedingly fat man who had come down, landing with enough force on the schooner to rock the ship lightly.

He wore metallic looking armor around a fat, stumpy looking frame, though he was in actuality quite tall. He wore a coat of some white-furred animal covering his shoulders and head, the head of the animal over his own head along with brown gloves lined with similarly white fur, and heavy looking woolen shorts for some reason. His face was also unusual, with a jaw, top and bottom, made of metal, and he had violet hair that stuck out to either side of his head.

Shaking his head and then biting into a sword, the man chewed thoughtfully for a moment before burping and patting his stomach, eyeing Robin's turtle companion hungrily. The turtle noticed this and actually backed away from the man, his weathered, wrinkled face showing a certain amount of anxiety.

Not even looking at the pirates, the man went on. “Well, whatever. I suppose I should ask just to get it over with. I don't suppose you have an Eternal Pose to Drum Island, do you?”

“No, we don't. Now get off my ship, asshole,” Luffy growled, unwilling to start something unless he had to. He wasn't worried about the people who had come aboard their ship of course. But he was worried about the cannons facing them from the ship and splinters. He could probably protect a few of the others, and Sanji, Zoro, and Makino would probably be able to look after themselves. But Vivi, still inside the cafeteria/day cabin under the forecastle, was unable to move.

“Mah, mah you silly hippo. Don't be so hasty to die, eh?” the man said, shaking his head while his eyes slid once more to the turtle before flicking over to the duck, who immediately squawked, hiding behind the larger animal.

Beside the speaker was another strange character. He was a medium sized man wearing a yellow cape that looked somewhat like the fat man's shorts, an orange shirt and shorts, and gloves that looked like giant furry afros. This was made stranger as he had an afro style hairdo, and even his beard had three clumps that looked remarkably like small afros.

This man spoke up now, eyeing Robin up and down, even going so far as to leer at her and then Makino in turn. Apparently Nami was a little too young for him. “Wapol-sama, though they might not have an Eternal Pose, they do have other signs of wealth...”

Robin frowned, and without even moving her arms summoned up several hands which grabbed at the man’s crotch and squeezed. “GAAYAYAYAH!!!!”

As the man screamed, Robin turned to the other soldiers all around who had backed up rapidly, one brow quirking quizzically. “Anyone else want to imply anything?”

“NO MA’AM!” they all shouted, saluting and backing away rapidly while the sad jester moved to help the afroed man to his feet, backing away quickly.

For his part the man addressed as Wapol simply laughed at his follower’s misfortune. He turned away, staring at the pirate crew, then going back to looking at the turtle. “Mahaha! That’ll teach you to keep your eyes on the real prize, Kuromarimo!”

Sanji nearly snorted his cigarette into his mouth at the afroed man’s name, looking up at Zoro who was still in the crow’s nest and whose forehead now began to twitch angrily. Luffy too smirked, while Robin and Makino rolled their eyes, and Nami giggled.

Wapol, however, didn’t seem to notice this, continuing to talk as he licked his lips still staring at Banchi. “We’ll be taking all your supplies, of course, as well as searching the ship for treasure. After that we’ll let you go if you cooperate. For now, though, I’m still hungry!”

With that Wapol’s mouth suddenly gaped open like a hippo’s, almost as large as the rest of his body. It enlarged so much it could have chomped down onto the giant turtle’s head.

“And suddenly my desire to not start a fight is gone!” Luffy said then leaped forwards.

Several of the cowed men on deck revered at that, raising their rifles towards him. "Fool, don't interrupt the King's meal!"

"So I can kick them now?" Sanji asked, pulling away his scarf and leaping into action as Zoro laughed, leaping down from on high after cutting down the two men who had moved to cover him. He slashed his way through several men closing swiftly with the sad jester who was trying to bring around a bow and arrow from on his back. Surprisingly, he quickly used his bow to deflect Zoro's attack for a few seconds, jumping backwards and putting more troops between himself and Zoro, leaving the still winded Kuromarimo behind for a second.

Even the girls got in on the act. Nami lashed out, smashing her pole into Kuromarimo's already abused nether regions, having sidled up towards him in the few seconds that had passed since Robin's attack on him. Makino took out several of the snipers above them, then was forced to dodge backwards as a few of them attacked her with bayonets. She then stopped running, letting them come to her, and lashed out with fists and feet guarding the forecastle which lead to Vivi's room and where Robin had retreated to.

Closing her eyes Robin summoned up hundreds of hands inside the giant ship, taking out the various gunners manning the cannons aimed down towards the schooner. Surprisingly, only a few of the cannons had been manned. Going by what her conjured eyes could see Robin noted the ship had a lot of soldiers, but they didn't have much in the way of cannonballs or gunpowder. The few manned cannons fell swiftly, though there were still a lot of troops racing up to take part in the battle.

However, by this point Luffy had reached their king. Wapol's mouth had closed around the turtle's head, but only for a second before Luffy's fist slammed into his side. Breath expelled from Wapol's mouth as he opened it in shock and pain while he rolled away. Before he could regain his feet, however, Luffy pulled his foot back and kicked the rotund man as hard as he could, sending him flying over the side of the schooner and out over the ocean. "Get off my ship, you bastard!"

"GAH, Wapol-sama! Retreat, everyone!" the sad jester shouted, turning and racing up the ropes up onto their ship. He was swiftly followed by the remaining troops who had boarded the Straw Hats' ship, including the groaning and weeping Kuromarimo as he was dragged back by several others. At least half of the regular

troops had died under the Star Hats' fierce defense, though, and their bodies were left behind, their fellows showing no concern for them at all.

Once Kuromarimo was aboard the large ship it pulled away quickly from the schooner. "After him! How dare they do something so cruel? Wapol-sama is a hammer! We have to go after him before he drowns!"

The poor man that Robin and Nami had...assaulted in a most heinous manner had somehow gotten back to his feet by this point, and he stood at the stern of the ship. His voice was weak and a high alto as he shouted, his voice disappearing into the distance. "You'll regret this! We'll get you for thiiiiissss!!"

"What was all that about?" Luffy asked no one in particular, shaking his head as the large ship moved swiftly out of sight. "I mean, their captain being a hammer I understood at least, but they seemed rather fixated on...Drum Island..." he trailed off, turning to look over at Robin, his eyes going wide.

Now that the violence was over with Robin began to chuckle, having heard the same thing, though why the other ship hadn't asked if they had a Log Pose or even noticed the one on Luffy's wrist, she didn't know. "I do not know if it is your luck or the princess's, captain-san, but either must be quite high. Drum Island is known for its medical knowledge and its doctors worldwide. If we can get Vivi help anywhere, it will be there."

Nami quickly raced to the tiller. "Then what are we waiting for!?"

Near midday the crew saw an island in the distance, and as they grew closer they were able to make out more details. It was a sort of double tiered island. A low cliff abutted the ocean without any apparent letup in sight as they came closer. Further inland there were three gigantic mountains **{check this}**. They seemed astonishingly tall, yet also smooth, and almost cylindrical in shape from what they could see. It looked like they were man made, but the sheer size of them made that impossible. Even giants could not have made something that large.

"I will never get used to the geography of the islands in the Grand Line, will I?" Luffy mused, staring at the mountain which had no doubt given the island its name.

“We’re going to have to search for an inlet or something. I don't want to leave the ship anchored where anyone can see it. Even if that other ship didn't have a Log Pose or any navigator, they could stumble on us through simply sailing around in the weather zone long enough,” Nami said. “We’ve used a lot of luck lately with our Log Pose actually finding this island. I don't want to tempt our luck further.”

“Too damn right,” Luffy muttered, shaking his head. “We’ll sail around until we find an inlet.”

This didn't take long, thankfully, and they found a small inlet leading deeper into the interior of the island. The crew quickly furled the sails then Sanji and Zoro moved to the side of the schooner and began to use two long punting poles to move the ship along. At the same time Luffy used a rope to take soundings.

It was quite deep, however, and eventually the three of them maneuvered the ship into a small cove, though there didn't seem to be any sign of the cliff face coming to an end. There were, however, a series of stone steps leading up a cliff face facing them and a tiny wharf jutting from the bottom of the staircase.

As the ship turned to bring its side alongside the wharf, a sudden shout from above them grabbed everyone's attention. “Fire!” From above a fusillade of musket balls lashed down at the crew.

Despite that the crew was quickly able to dodge the barrage. Nami had been training for moments like this and fell into Kami-E, flowing around the bullets aimed at her, while Zoro took his swords out and began to use them to block the incoming bullets. Luffy and Sanji simply ducked and dodged in place, while Robin and Makino hid behind the mainmast, then ducked into the door leading into the day cabin.

At Robin's quizzical look the older woman shrugged. “Just because I can use Tekkai and Armor haki to take shots like that doesn't mean it isn't painful. Besides, it's always better to dodge a hit than take it, whatever your defense.”

“Sound thinking,” Robin replied, even as she crossed her hands and began to summon up eyeballs all along the top of the mainmast, then on the cliff, moving upward towards the attackers trying to get a view of them.

Outside, Luffy had just about enough of this. He leaped up into the air and began to use Geppo to ascend up the cliff. He was forced to dodge this way and that as the riflemen got over their shock and started to take him under fire, but Luffy was easily able to deal with this. Musket balls had nothing on his Ji-Kure's fists in terms of speed, let alone hitting power.

Behind him Sanji quickly did the same, ascending far faster than Zoro would've been able to. His leg strength had been astonishing before the Geppo training, so he'd taken to it quickly.

When he reached the top, Luffy found himself confronted by what looked like a people's militia of about forty firing at him and his friends. Most of them looked like average citizens of a winter island, but one of them stood out from the crowd. He was at least four feet taller than the men around him and as wide as four normal people, with massively muscled shoulders. He didn't seem to be firing with the others, rather he was trying to get them to calm down, waving his arms wildly. He wasn't having any luck though.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Luffy shouted at the top of his lungs. "Stop firing, you idiots! I can understand why you'd fire on a group of pirates, and we won't take it personally, but we're here to see a doctor! That's all, we don't even need any supplies. We're not here to attack you!"

"How are we supposed to believe the word of pirates!?" shouted someone in the crowd.

Luffy scowled, deciding to put a stop to this crap. He stood, hopping in midair and caught the musket ball as it came at him, crushing it in his grip before he tossed it back underhand to the man who had tried to shoot him as the man gaped at him. At the same time Sanji came up over the edge of the cliff. "Well, you could take my word for it, or my friend and I could simply wipe all of you out and then go searching for a Doctor on our own. We won't be turned aside, but we also don't actually want to hurt anyone!"

At that the fire finally abated, and people began to listen to them. Luffy bowed his head slightly in gratitude, flipping his straw hat off his head as he did, waving it towards the schooner. "Our friend down below is sick, please, and we need a

doctor. We've kept her alive as well as we could over the past day, but there's no way she'll survive to another island."

The large man Luffy had noticed before nodded his head slowly. "We have your word that you mean no harm to anyone on this island?"

"Unless your doctors refuse to see us because we're pirates, I mean no harm to anyone on this island," Luffy said seriously, bowing his head once more.

After a moment the man nodded. "Follow me, then."

"Dalton-san!" shouted someone else, looking aghast.

The large man turned to him, smiling lightly and patting the other man's shoulder. "Don't worry, I'll watch over them. Besides," he went on, his voice both concerned and morose. "It doesn't look as if we were doing much to them anyway."

"Robin, Zoro, Makino, you three stay here," Luffy ordered as the rest of the crew made their way up the cliff to his position. "Just in case that crew we tangled with finds the island I want to be able to repel them from here."

Dalton, who had just turned away to lead the group into the island, turned back now. "Wait, you ran into someone nearby?"

Luffy nodded and explained what had happened, and Dalton's expression turned both flinty and then happy as he heard how Luffy and his crew had dealt with them. "Then we are grateful for your arrival, stranger. But if they are in the area we need to keep a lookout. Thank you for your crew's help."

"Not a problem," Luffy said with a shrug as Sanji came up the path with Vivi on his back. "If pirates wanted to be welcomed everywhere, we wouldn't be pirates in the first place. He looked at Nami and Robin who both smirked back at him. "Besides, I think at least one of that crew has a major bone to pick with a few of ours."

"Judging by what my hands felt I wouldn't call his bone major at all, even before I crushed it," Robin replied dryly, eliciting a giggle from Nami and Makino and wincing from all the men, even Luffy.

Not understanding that at all, Dalton merely began to lead the group away into the forest towards the nearest village. At the same time he started to explain what had occurred recently on the island. A pirate crew had attacked about three to four weeks ago. But instead of trying to fight them, the king of the island, Wapol, had escaped to sea with most of the army and his two primary advisors.

"He didn't even try to fight?" Sanji asked incredulously. "And he called himself a king?" To his side Luffy growled agreement as Vivi, who had weakly opened her eyes a moment ago as Nami had put a hat over her head, snarled. But she was too weak to say anything, and soon her eyes closed once more.

"The king is more important than the land. The king is the country. The people do not matter in comparison to the king!" Dalton said, spitting out each word as if it was a curse. "All that really matters is the royal family and its favor."

"And the pirate crew?" Luffy asked somewhat dispassionately now, though he had noticed Vivi's moment of fury and actually hid a smile at that. *Good girl*. Still, he was not unused to cowards after all, and frankly he bet that there were more royals out there like Wapol than Vivi, who had put her life on the line for her kingdom.

"They ravaged the land a bit, though they didn't kill as many of us as they could have. They were simply interested in stealing as much food as they could carry and wiping out a town that tried to turn them aside. It was as if they didn't care about us at all. They simply lashed out at times when they got bored. Not, mind you, that we had much in the way of gold or anything of that nature anyway after the king had escaped with his jewelry." Dalton scowled, shaking his head. "I, I couldn't do anything to them. I challenged one of the pirates to a fight, and he beat me so easily it was appalling. I was lucky to live at all."

In any other circumstance Nami would have tried to get Dalton to continue talking about the treasure, but not with her friend hurt. "That's nice and all, but where the hell is the doctor!?" Then she paused staring at an odd creature coming out of the woods. It looked like a bear, but had a back pack and a hiking stick. "What the..."

"Oh, that's just a walking bear. Bow your head as it passes, and it won't attack." At those words the pirates did so before continuing on with Dalton.

Moments later they came to a small village. They moved quickly to a small house at the edge of the village. Many of the villagers, women and children for the most part, shouted out Dalton's name. They wanted reassurance about the strangers and the fact their men hadn't returned from the cliff yet. Dalton stopped to speak to several of them, waving the Straw Hats on to his house.

Inside they had time to lay Vivi out on the bed and for Nami to whip up some hot tea from the small kitchen before Dalton rejoined them. When he did, Luffy reiterated Nami's question, leaning against the wall next to the bed as Sanji sat on the foot of it. Nami took up position on a stool, leaning back against Luffy's leg as her free hand rested on Vivi's brow.

"There is only one doctor on this island at this point, though we call her a witch. She is rather..." Dalton paused trying to think about how to describe the witch of the island before shaking his head. "Indescribable?"

He sighed, looking down at Vivi for a moment, cocking his head to one side as if he recognized her somehow. Shaking his head, he moved back to the here and now, though his eyes were even more inquisitive as he stared at the pirates. None of his thoughts, however, were revealed in his words as he continued to explain Drum Kingdom's current straits. "You see, a few years back Wapol decided to round up all the doctors and push them into a group called the Ishi-20. Once he had control of them, he charged the people exorbitant amounts for any use of them, while they were there to always help him."

"This is all making me very glad that Vivi is asleep," Nami muttered, shaking her head as she looked at her friend. Behind her Luffy smirked, having seen Vivi wake up earlier for a few minutes, but he doubted she would be waking up again soon.

"At any rate, Dr. Kureha, the witch, evaded capture for a time, along with one of other doctor named Hiluluk, though he is no longer with us." Dalton's teeth ground for a moment at that before he went on. "She still continues to move around the island drawn by a reindeer-led carriage, though many people have sworn that she actually seems to fly through the air on it."

"Santa Claus?" Luffy muttered, causing Nami to look up at him quizzically, but he waved her question away, instead addressing Dalton. "So where does she live?"

“She lives in the king's former palace on the top of Drum Island. She moved in there when he escaped as a way to rub Wapol's nose in his cowardice. But getting there is going to be insanely difficult. Your best bet is to simply wait here and hope she comes down to visit one of the villages around the island. I can send word out to the other villages on the island so if she appears anywhere they'll know to ask her to wait, and we can travel to her quickly.”

“No,” Luffy said simply. “It's been nearly a full day since Vivi's been poisoned, and she is fading far too fast for me to trust to that kind of time consuming plan. I'll simply take her up there now.”

“You can't! That mountain is far, **far** taller than the cliff face. It's also much colder. The cold may kill you just as quickly as the climb,” Dalton protested.

“I'm not going to try to climb. I'll air walk just like I did by the cliff. The height doesn't matter to me. The cold though, that might.” Shrugging his shoulders, Luffy remove the coat he had been wearing, putting it around Vivi as he looked over at Sanji. “Sorry, Sanji. I know you want to look after her, but you're still not as good at Geppo as I am, and I can take the cold better than you can too.”

Sanji ground his teeth angrily but nodded. Then he reached out and grabbed Luffy's red shirt, pulling him in close. “You protect her, you hear!?” he shouted, shaking Luffy almost comically as he began to bawl. “My precious Vivi-chan! Oh, I am so sorry your previous knight cannot be the one to save you and must leave it to this swine!”

“I'll...look...after...her...Sanji,” Luffy said between shakes. “Besides, this will let you stay here to watch over Robin, Nami, and Makino in case of trouble.”

“That's true!” Sanji exclaimed shaking his head and moving away to bow grandly to Nami, who had remained by the bed as Luffy moved around her. “Oh how I wish I was two people so that I could protect all of the flowers at once.”

Luffy pinched his nose briefly, looking over at where Vivi was still sleeping in the bed, then over at Nami who was giggling and leading Sanji on a little, exclaiming over how she was so happy he would be here in case Wapol and his crew showed up once more.

He picked Vivi up swiftly, cradling her in his arms and making for the door. He stopped by the door, looking at Carue, who like Sanji looked like he wanted to help get his mistress cured. "Don't worry, Carue. I'll get her help. Don't worry."

The duck squawked once, then got out of Luffy's way, watching him step outside.

"The top of the mountain, you said?" Luffy asked over his shoulder at Dalton who had followed him, still somewhat astonished or perhaps horrified at Luffy's plan. Still, he nodded and watched as Luffy leaped into the air, bouncing away like a rabbit heading out up and down a staircase.

Dalton gaped after him, shaking his head. "I saw it on the cliffs, but is he serious? Do you really think he can make it all the way up like that?"

"I don't know how far up into the air he can go. But I have learned that betting against Luffy is a losing proposition," Nami said, shaking her head. "Come on, let's head back to the cliff. I bet Robin would like some tea, and we need to stop Makino from needling Zoro to death."

OOOOOOO

Luffy estimated that he was about thirty stories' height in the air, and he still could not see the top of the mountain, but the air was growing very cold very quickly.

He looked down at the girl in his arms as she stirred suddenly, her eyes opening blearily as they had earlier that day. He smiled down at her, shaking his head. "Go back to sleep, Vivi. I've got you."

"S, sorry L, Luffy-san, for, for being so weak," she whispered feebly.

"You're not weak," Luffy said firmly while continuing his ascent. "Poison is a coward's weapon, and you're very strong for not having succumbed to it over the last day, to my way of thinking, anyway. Besides, you already proved you were strong and

daring. Infiltrating a criminal group to save your island? That takes guts, doesn't it, and strength too. Remember, Vivi, willpower is to physical strength as ten is to one."

With that he winked at her. "Don't worry, Vivi. You'll get better, and we'll head on to Alabasta and save it." Vivi flushed more than her current weakness allowed for, but nuzzled his chest as Luffy continued to speak. "I've got you. Trust me, Vivi. You're going to be all right."

OOOOOOO

Mr. 3, his partner, and the partner-less Ms. Valentine had arrived on Drum Island shortly before the Straw Hat crew, having arrived here to see both if the Straw Hat crew would come here and if they could learn about the pirate crew that had attacked the island. After all, it was on one of the two routes to Alabasta. They had bypassed Little Garden, knowing that place was a death trap, and having Eternal Poses for each of the islands in the area around Alabasta had allowed Mr. 3 to plan accordingly. That was part and parcel of what made Mr. 3 such an effective agent: he planned ahead, and was quite ruthless in enacting his plans. However, Mr. 3 was rather worried.

Ms. Valentine was currently high up in the air spying on the Straw Hat crew, as she had been unable to confirm that Robin was travelling with the Straw Hat crew for the purpose of recruiting them. It was evident that they were still traveling together towards Alabasta, despite the fact that standing orders were to not allow any possible agent level recruits near the island until Mr. 0 had confirmed their loyalties in some fashion.

That might be pointing to the Ms. All Sunday having betrayed them, which would put Mr. 3 in a very dangerous position. He knew where he stood in combat ability to most of the other agents. If he could take Ms. All Sunday by surprise then perhaps he could kill her, but doing so would be extremely difficult given the woman's abilities and reputation.

There was also the problem that he would probably not be able to call upon his partner to help. Miss Goldenweek had a somewhat decent relationship with a few of the other agents which included Ms. All Sunday, and would probably be unwilling to help him in any fashion against her. Capture perhaps, but not kill, and capturing the woman would be next to impossible in his estimation given all the rumors about the woman.

Still, if we can separate them, we could perhaps take on the Straw Hat crew. We know more about their abilities now thanks to Ms. Valentine and my own estimations, and I am not like Mr. Five, who always relied solely on his Devil Fruit power rather than any intellect he might have possessed. Separate them, trick them... Yes, my power is excellent at that... Mr. 3 thought as he sat in his wax house, sipping tea while his partner sat across from him, sipping her own tea and painting on her canvas.

Ms. Valentine soon came down to report what she had seen, setting aside the large kite thing that she had been using to cover herself in the air. From the ground she would have looked like an albatross high up in the air. "That thing is amazing," she gushed to the young girl. "You really do have a talent for painting, don't you?"

The girl blushed slightly, then winked at the older girl, and Mr. 3 coughed delicately to draw their attention to him. "And what did you see, Ms. Valentine?"

The blonde woman winced, moving over to the pot of tea and putting her hands around it to warm them. "It's them, all right. I'll never forget that damn sword using bastard as long as I live. But it's worse than that. I saw Ms. All Sunday with them too, and, and I think I might have seen someone who could have been the princess who was mine and Mr. 5's original target. She looks badly wounded or sick, but..."

Mr. 3 frowned coldly at that. *It is clear then. Ms. All Sunday has betrayed us. Or, or is she playing a long game here? Is the girl some kind of hostage? Though that is a change from our original orders I suppose it could make some sense... Drat it, I need to talk to her.*

With that thought, he shook his head. "I will approach Ms. All Sunday. We need to know what's going on. But that doesn't mean we need to be foolish about it..."

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It did not take Sanji, Nami, and Carue that long to get back to where they had left the ship. But during that time the ship they had tangled with that morning had spotted Drum Island and swiftly began to make its way there. Regardless of the weather of the Grand Line, the fact that compasses didn't work, and all of the other dangers, once a ship was within sight of an island it could, unless it was being navigated by someone like Zoro, find the island without further trouble.

Wapol moved to stand at the prow of his ship, throwing his head back as he cackled. "MAHAHAHAH, I'm coming back, my kingdom! MAHAHAH, your king will soon be home once more!!"

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On the island the Straw Hat crew on guard with the island's militia had begun to get bored very, very quickly. Or at least, one of them had. Nami was working on her maps on a foldout table hidden among the trees. Robin was sitting on a lounge chair sipping at a cup of steaming hot tea from a pot Sanji had prepared, who was bouncing between the two of them and Makino happily. Makino helped organize a few of the militia men to bring some pine needles and cones down to the turtle. Carue spent his time staring up at the mountain in the distance and pacing around.

The problem was, alas, the first mate, which outside of combat, talking about fighting and swords, or drinking, had an attention span more akin to that of a small child. "I'm going to go explore for a bit," Zoro said after only about an hour on watch, having at last reached the limit of his endurance. "Shout if you need help, aho-cook."

"What was that, you national treasure!? Was that, 'I want to eat my own intestines for dinner, Sanji,' I just heard?" the cook shouted back.

However it was the green haired woman who had the most snappy response to Zoro's statement. "Wait, Zoro. What do you mean you're going to go explore?! How will you find your way back here, you little lost child?"

The two of them had continually clashed heads on this point, with Makino's teasing going from simple teasing to being rather pointed in tone. She did not like how Zoro simply refused to admit that he had a problem with directions, knowing that it would eventually get them all into trouble. For his part, Zoro thought she was simply being a crabby bitch, though he was intelligent enough to never say so aloud. "Ah, get off my case woman. If I get lost I can just follow the damn cliff face. It's not that big an island, after all."

"I suppose so," Makino replied, holding her chin as if she was thinking deeply on his response. "But still, Carue?" The duck looked over from where he had once more been staring toward the mountain. "Could you go with Zoro, please?"

"Gwah!" the duck replied, even going so far as to salute with one of his wings before moving over to take Zoro by the hand with one of his wings.

Sanji laughed loudly and went into his normal flirtatious mode, exclaiming that Makino was as funny as she was beautiful. Zoro simply grunted and turned away, stalking through the woods after shaking Carue's grip off. The duck did, however, continue to follow him as per Makino's request.

A little ways back from the rest of the crowd Robin was sitting against a tree wrapped in a woolen coat with a large pot of tea to one side as she reclined on the makeshift chair, one of several dozen that the inhabitants of the island had brought out for the militia to use while on watch. Robin figured that the others would spot something, and that would allow her enough time to prepare herself despite her position well back from the others.

She paused between one page and the next, her long dexterous fingers halting in place as she held the page for a moment before letting it fall to one side and continuing to read. Then she slowly stood up and laid the book to one side. She picked up the mug of tea, pouring herself some before sloshing it from side to side as if the pot was empty, which it actually was by this point. With that Robin walked off, knowing that none of the militia man or the rest of the pirate crew had seen her move.

She quickly moved through the woods towards a snow bank, that when you got closer to it you would realize was a little too solid. It was, however, a very good approximation, and you had to look very closely to see that. *Mr. 3 then. He always has been quite good at infiltration missions.*

“And what brings you to this island, Mr. 3?” Robin asked, swiftly stepping around the front of the snow bank so that no one else would be able to hear or see them. That this also brought her within sight of the man himself was not incidental.

Mr. 3 looked at her, then took a few steps backwards, a little uneasy at how quickly Ms. All-Sunday had spotted him from so far away, not having noticed she had conjured up several dozen eyes in a circle around her former position. Then he flicked his eyes over the snow bank towards where the militia and the Straw Hat crew were lounging around. Obviously they had no idea what could be going on in the woods.

Looking back at Ms. All-Sunday he knew he had a chance to take her out before anyone noticed, but to his chagrin Robin was already on guard. He had barely begun to create the series of traps he wanted to use in order to confront her on a possible even footing, and he knew he was at a disadvantage in a direct confrontation unless he could lead her deeper into the woods, where his traps were already laid out in spots.

But right now, facing the woman, he did not feel at all confident of his ability to deal with her even alone. She was too suspicious and too experienced to be taken in by his tricks or let him lead her anywhere.

“I was ordered by Mr. 0 to pick up Ms. Valentine, and we were on our way back to Alabasta when reports of the attack here reached us. I decided to check and see what pirate crew had attacked this island, though as far as I can tell there were only four crewmen, and they ravaged the entire country. I had intended to see if I could find any more information about them to pass on to Mr. 0 just in case they showed up in Alabasta. But then we heard news of your arrival, and I hastened over here as soon as possible.”

“I noticed that your snow bank was painted. Does that mean your partner is around here somewhere?” Robin asked pleasantly. She could tell the man was lying and was somewhat concerned about his speaking with Ms. Valentine and what that

could mean, but she was unwilling to instigate anything just yet. While Crocodile's need for her was immense, it wasn't enough for him to overlook her outright betraying him, and doing so might well completely block her from fulfilling her dream, to find and read the poneglyph hidden in Alabasta.

Moreover, Robin had a spot soft spot for Miss Goldenweek, or Katherine as was her real name. She was not a killer, not even a criminal really, just a girl who was going along with things because Mr. 3 was her uncle who had been watching over her for the last few years, and she was too passive and laid back to care overmuch about anything.

At those words the little girl in question popped up from behind a tree, waving at Robin. "Hey Ms. All-Sunday!"

Mr. 3 groaned to himself, but went on gamely before his niece and Robin could change the subject. "How goes the recruitment of the Straw Hats?"

"Their captain is a stubborn individual," Robin replied blithely. After all, it was the truth. "And he has a tremendously large dream that he is chasing. Would you believe he wants to be the Pirate King?"

She felt a little bad about denigrating Luffy's dream like that, but he wasn't here to hear it, and it certainly seemed to disarm Mr. 3 as he shook his head at the naïveté of youth. "As for the others, I have gotten the cook and navigator on board to the idea of joining Baroque Works. They are much more intelligent and understanding of how the world really works. The first mate is coming along slowly, but surely, as is their bursar, though their loyalty to their captain is admirable."

"Are they really worth the trouble?" Mr. 3 asked as if he didn't know about Vivi. The more information he had about the group the better, after all.

"I believe so, yes. Their captain could face off with Mr. 1 and win handily, and their first mate is at least a little bit better than Mr. Two, which could also be said for the chef. That kind of addition to our military power should not be overlooked."

Robin had already determined that Mr. 3 knew more than he was letting on, so she was only speaking in generalities, wondering if he or one of the others had seen Vivi being carried deeper inland. *Yes, that would fit his pattern. He would be too*

fearful to attack me physically, so would be fishing for information to use at a later date. She frowned, thinking hard to herself even as she continued to speak about how Luffy had dealt with Basil Hawkins, which alone would have made him a good target for recruitment.

What to do? What to do!? If I fight Mr. 3 now, that will no doubt be seen by Crocodile as my cutting all ties with him. I will lose his backing to get to and read the poneglyph, no matter how much he would need me to read it in the first place. But if I let Mr. 3 go, the same event might occur. Can I convince Mr. 3 that I am playing a long game? Or... Or can I somehow bring him alongside?

Katherine was no trouble. Once she was told the truth about Crocodile's aims, the girl would throw her loyalty to Baroque works over the side as easily as Robin would an apple. *Her loyalty to her uncle, though, that could be trouble.*

Before Robin could decide what to do, a shout from the shoreline brought their attention towards that quarter. "There's a ship out there! Is that the one that the king escaped on?" A moment later the shouts of consternation and fear went up from the entire militia as Makino or one of the others must have confirmed that it was indeed the ship the Straw Hats had dealt with that morning.

"What's this?" Mr. 3 asked, looking in that direction even as one hand went behind his back, beginning to form wax there. The wax slowly dripped from his hands down to the snow and moved through the snow as slowly as he could make it. The white of the wax melded into the snow too.

Robin frowned. "We dealt with what we thought was a pirate crew in the area this morning, though it turned out to be the king of this country. He apparently escaped after that pirate crew you mentioned attacked the island and has been attempting to come back since."

"I see," "And the Straw Hat crew has agreed to fight them for the Islanders? For what reason?" Mr. 3 asked. "For some fee I presume?"

"I suggest you get out of her here quickly unless you wish to become involved in the fighting," Robin said not answering his question. With that she moved to step around the candle-snow bank.

“One final point Mr. All-Sunday,” the man said then shouted, “Candle lock!”

Robin jumped up, avoiding the runnel of wax that suddenly shot up out of the snow trying to grab her hands and legs as Miss Goldenweek gasped looking at her uncle in shock. “What are you doing?! She's on...”

“She is not! She has betrayed Baroque Works to the Straw Hat crew!” Mr. 3 shouted. “Now get ready to use your Colors Trap!”

The girl looked a little torn for a moment, before slowly putting paint to her canvas.

Robin, however, had already crossed her hands over her chest. Hands appeared on Katherine's body tickling her, while others removed the paint supplies from her hands even as Robin dodged more attacks from Mr. 3. Having already spread out several dozen eyes, she knew what few trees weren't real but were actually wax creations, so she was able to remain free and moving. Even the few actual candles he had placed here were snuffed by a few fingers appearing and disappearing.

Nearby the battle on the coastline had already begun, with cracks of musket fire and shouts echoing through the woods, covering this bit of action. But it had also reached Zoro, who had not yet left hearing distance, and he came charging through the woods, two swords already in his hands. “Eat that, Makino! The sound told me where the action is. Who needs that damn duck now, woman!” he shouted to himself as he came out of the woods nearby.

Seeing a strange man with a burning three on his head attacking Robin, he didn't ask questions, instead he simply shouted, “Tora-Gari!” Two of his swords flashed into an attack as he charged forward.

It was all Mr. 3 could do to throw up a candle wall to block the assault. He gasped, however, as the swords sliced through the wax halfway before stopping, and he jumped backwards, shouting aloud, “Now, Ms. Valentine!”

From above came the cackling laugh of Ms. Valentine announcing her presence as she dropped like several tons of bricks, heading straight towards, not Zoro, but Robin.

But as she passed through the pine trees around them a web of hands suddenly appeared from several different directions pulling her off course. Instead of her leg smashing into Robin, the girl found herself flipped and slammed to the ground headfirst. Ms. Valentine's weight might have changed, but that didn't actually add much to her durability. The impact, with all of her own enhanced weight behind it, knocked the girl out like a light.

Looking between Mr. 3's current stalemate with Zoro and the sounds of battle occurring nearby, Robin shrugged and moved in that direction. She could leave Mr. 3 to the swordsman for now. Her powers were better used to take care of crowds anyway, and Zoro seemed the type to get irritated if she stuck her nose in. *Besides, he was going stir crazy before. Best to give him an outlet for that energy.*

Walking off through the woods as if she didn't have a care in the world, Robin called out over her shoulder. "Watch out for the colors trap from Miss Goldenweek. They will affect your mind and force you to act in different manners depending on the color. They travel along the ground until the mark is right beneath or on you. But if you hurt her, swordsman-san, I'm going to do to you what I did to that black-afroed fellow this morning!"

Grunting and actually covering himself protectively for a moment, Zoro nodded frantically before turning back to his own opponent. Zoro pulled his swords out of the large wall of wax or something, glaring at its owner as he recovered his rather frayed dignity. "Who are you, and what's your beef with that conniving woman?"

"None of your concern," Mr. 3 said coolly, his hands coming up and ready as his mind thought furiously, his candle-candle powers dripping down from his hands. Behind him his partner scrambled in the snow, grabbing up her drawing utensils and scowling a little.

Katherine didn't know who to believe here. Ms. All-Sunday had always been nice to her and had even helped teach her how to read. The idea that she had betrayed Baroque Works was strange. However helping her uncle defeat the strange green-haired swordsman was something she could do easily.

Turning to use her powers on the swordsman who was now exchanging attacks with her uncle, Katherine stopped as a yellow streak zoomed into the clearing. The streak paused, forming into a large duck who stared at the two men, wiping his forehead as if relieved.

Carue had actually lost Zoro at one point as they moved through the forest and had been worried about what Makino would do to him for losing his charge. His appearance, however, actually put him closer to the young girl than the two combatants, and he turned to her, cocking his head quizzically as he wondered what her role in this fight was. "Guah?"

At the sight of the giant duck the girl suddenly screamed, throwing her stuff into the air and charging off through the woods shouting, "I hate ducks!"

Confused, Carue chased after her for a moment, then turned and looked at Zoro before deciding to continue to chase after the strange girl, still wondering what was going on. But this looked too fun for him to ignore.

The two men stared after the animal and the young girl, sweatdrops on their faces. Then Zoro looked over at Mr. 3. "Some kind of phobia?"

"Of a sort, yes," Mr. 3 said, frowning thoughtfully as he scratched at his chin. "She was given a book on animals from one of the other agents, only Mr. 7 bought her a book on animal biology. She liked ducks and so read the chapter about them, and well... Let's just say ducks are freaky little bastards in a lot of ways."

The two blinked then turned to one another, and Mr. 3 quickly shot his wax forward here and there. Some of the wax formed into trees that began to try and wrap around Zoro as he ducked and dodged. Other rivulets of wax shot out of the snow at Zoro directly while Mr. 3 kept backing away trying to open the range. He disliked direct confrontation at the best of times, and he had to get a better handle on how good this swordsman was before trying to come up with a specific strategy to use against him.

Zoro, however, wouldn't give him a moment's piece to set up his traps in the area, which combined with the cold and the wind meant he couldn't use his favorite trick of using candles to spread flakes of wax to slow his opponents down. The swordsman's swords flashed around with a speed Mr. 3's attacks couldn't keep up

with. Despite that, he had a plan, and began to lead the swordsman deeper into the woods.

OOOOOOO

At the cliff the militiamen were firing down at Wapol's ship, but the king's ship was so tall that they lost much of their height advantage against his troops. Further, they had come into the inlet with most of the men already up in the rigging and ready for battle, putting them nearly on the same level as the defenders.

Chess was there, and his arrows were doing quite a bit of damage in conjunction with Kuromarimo, who had been unable to engage the Straw Hats when they met him this morning thanks to Robin's swift response. He tossed highly flammable afros up into the militia men's positions, which Chess set on fire swiftly, burning people and covering foliage away swiftly. Fire was practically everywhere on the cliff thanks to the two of them, and scaling ropes and ladders had already clanked into place as the king was slowly hefted up over the cliff face.

Then Sanji was there, charging forward with a kick that nearly took the king in the face. "Get out of here, you shitty king!"

"MAHAHA, foolish hippo!" The king shouted, opening his mouth gaping wide to chomp down on Sanji.

But Sanji stopped mid kick, dodging to one side in a twirl on his pivot leg, coming around with the roundhouse kick. It caught the king in the side, hurling him back down onto the ship with a thunderous crash. "GAHH!"

Beside him Dalton had charged forward too, his massive spade coming off of his shoulder and hacking down several dozen men, hurling them over the sides of the cliff. While his victims shouted at him, calling him captain Dalton, the man himself began to slowly transform.

Sanji paused, pulling his cigarette out of his mouth for a moment as he stared at Dalton's new form, breathing up a spiral of smoke even as he dodged a few musket balls coming his way. "Devil Fruit?"

"Zoan Type, Bison!" Shouted the man, then charged forward towards another clump of soldiers that had ascended the cliff, bowling them over like ninepins. "Hold the cliff, my friends. If we can keep them from using their numbers against us, we can win this!" Dalton's exhortations were answered with a roar, and the militia men fought on doggedly despite the fire and the musket balls of the army which had suppressed them for so long.

Despite Dalton's shouts, however, it was Nami and Makino who had taken command of the militiamen. Well, mostly Nami. Her shouting of orders and simply smacking heads together had forced the militiamen to back away from the bushes the moment their cover had begun to go up like little miniature bonfires thanks to the afro man's afro attacks. At the same time Makino had tried to take out Chess only to be forced out of position by his own attack. Having retreated from the cliff face she could no longer target him, as he had stayed on the ship, while his arrows kept on coming up on a parabolic trajectory into the defenders.

Scowling, she dropped her pistol and pulled out a short sword from her ki expanded pouch, moving towards the fight now spreading across the cliff face. "I'm going to sneak forward and cut all of the grappling ropes. Dalton's right, if we can keep more of them from getting up the cliff we can win this fight."

Shaking her head, Nami moved towards her, grabbing her shoulder. "Don't!"

Just then the king had reappeared over the edge of the cliff, huffing and groaning as he pulled himself upright. "I am so angry I can't even find the words, you damn hippos!"

Beside him, Chess and Kuromarimo had also jumped up as the militia men retreated, moving further into the woods. Half of them were down by this point, dead or injured, while the soldiers had possibly lost a little over half the troops that had attempted to scale the cliffs.

“You, all of you are traitors to your king!” Wapol bellowed, and more than one of the militiamen looked actually terrified, though none of the pirates present understood why.

“You dare call yourself a king!? After you ran off, abandoning your people to those pirates!” Dalton roared back, moving forward, smashing several soldiers out of his way. “A king is meant to serve and defend the people as your father did, earning and repaying their loyalty for his position! Yet you abused and used your people with your taxes and your Ishi-20! And when you were called upon to defend your nation, you ran like a coward!”

“Bah, the king is the country, Dalton, as I have always said. You never understood that, even when you served as captain of my guard, you silly hippo.” Wapol shook his head mock sadly while at the same time Sanji tried to close with the king once more, but was kept at bay by Chess and Kuromarimo. Makino and Nami were kept away similarly by the rest of the group of soldiers, who paid for it badly. “I protected myself, and thus the kingdom is saved!”

“I will never allow you to call yourself king of this country again! Never!” Dalton shouted, charging forward.

“Hoh, so you challenge me again, Dalton? Hah! Chess, remind me what I've eaten today?”

Chess pulled back slightly and flipped open a notebook, then began to read aloud quickly, knowing Kuromarimo could not hold off the kick using pirate for very long. “Hai. You have had four cannons sautéed in wine sauce, seared artillery lasagna with mortar stand sandwich, fifteen servings of cannon ball spaghetti, along with a garnish of gunpowder.”

“What the hell does that guy eat?” Sanji muttered, standing up from where he had gone down on one knee to try and scrape off an afro ball.

“This is his power, the Baku-Baku fruit! We have to charge now!” Dalton shouted, quickly putting action to words. “We can't let him transform!”

Shrugging, Sanji charged with him, though other than the giant mouth and his ability to eat even his enemies he hadn't seen anything that dangerous from the would-be king.

In reply to their charge Chess and Kuromarimo moved to block them. But instead of firing at Dalton, Chess fired past him towards the militiamen as Kuromarimo hurled his afro balls in the same direction.

Dalton swiftly halted his charge, moving in front of the arrow and grabbing it out of the air. But the afro stuck, and Chess chuckled as another arrow swiftly flew towards it. "Too predictable, Dalton! You really are just too soft, aren't you?"

But his arrow shattered midair from a musket ball from Makino, and Dalton charged forward once more.

But the two officers had gained their king enough time to finish his transformation. "MAHAHA, you foolish hippos, behold the power of the Baku-Baku fruit! Fortress Wapol!"

His body grew to three times his original size, while several dozen legs appeared out from his side, clamping down onto the ground, his armor changing to look thicker and tougher. From his shoulders and chest several dozen cannons poked out of various armored apertures, and his hands too were now cannons. He pointed them all forward and fired.

At the same instant Sanji hurled himself to the side, taking Nami to the ground and Makino shouted, "Tekkai!"

The explosions seemed to rock the entire area for a moment, hurling trees and people around. None of the militia remained standing after that, and Robin, who had just arrived on the scene after having dealt with Ms. Valentine, was flung backwards through the trees and brush with everyone else. She landed, cracking her forearm and head against a rock, but otherwise unharmed thanks to the snow on the ground. Her head was ringing and her arm sore, her eyes refusing to focus for a moment, but she was among the lucky ones.

Dalton was still standing, but he had taken a direct blow from a cannonball. The front of his body was bleeding from numerous cuts and burns, and his eyes rolled up into his head as he fell forward unconscious.

Nearby Makino grunted, pushing herself out of the snow with difficulty. Her loose snow jacket was pretty ruined, and one of her legs was badly gashed in several places. Makino's Tekkai hadn't been able to cover her entire body before the explosion, and the shrapnel from it hit her position.

Sanji was quite a bit worse off since his own training in Tekkai had not gone very far. However, he pushed himself to his feet readily enough, glaring angrily at the king as Nami groaned from beneath him, pushing out of the snow.

"MAHAHA! You stupid hippos are at least a little more durable than the traitors, but even you will never be able to fight Fortress Wapol!" Wapol shouted as his officers moved to stand beside him. Behind them, more troops from the ship began to pull themselves up the cliff.

OOOOOOO

At around the time Wapol's ship was spotted out at sea Luffy landed on the top of Drum Island's massive mountain. He stared up at the castle, then further up at the flag flying over it, a pirate flag with a series of sakura petals scattered across the normal skull and crossbones symbol. "A pirate flag? I suppose given the fact the she's moved in here and stolen this place that makes a little sense," he murmured to himself. "Hopefully the doctor is in, Vivi. I really don't want to have to wait around for her."

When he got closer he was surprised to notice that the large gate into the castle was open. Shrugging that mystery off as well he entered, shouting "Anyone in here! I've got an injured person here to see the doctor?"

After a moment no one had answered, and he moved towards the staircase, still shouting for help.

Before any had taken reached the second floor however, he was interrupted by a shout from behind him. "Trespasser! Get back Doctorine!"

He turned and blinked as a giant furry creature that looked sort of like a Sasquatch attacked him, charging forward and throwing punches and kicks with little skill or speed to them in Luffy's opinion, but with a lot of enthusiasm. He stood taller than Luffy, and far wider too, with coarse but spare fur covering his frame, thicker on his chest and shoulders, and wearing a purple hat.

Behind him there was an older woman, looking to be around his grandfather's age or so. She was a tall woman with a thin appearance wearing clothes that were more suitable for someone Nami's age living on an autumn island: tight jeans and a jean jacket over a tight shirt with some kind of design on it.

He began to dodge backwards, ducking under and leaping over punches and kicks with ease, even with Vivi in his arms. "You don't look like the doctor considering I was told that was a woman, but..." *duck, dodge* "...I'm here with a patient that I'd like..." *duck dodge* "...her to look at, and will you stop that!?" he said suddenly, kicking the beast's hand up with one leg, ducking underneath another blow while nearly performing a split before flipping himself upright his leg coming up in a tight arc which caught the creature on the chin, hurling him backwards.

He looked at the old woman who entered behind them monster and nodded his head to her. "As I was saying, I have a patient for you to look at, baa-san."

"HAH?!?!?!?" The woman suddenly growled, her eyes gleaming with the rage as her face stiffened into a mask of anger. To her side, the creature suddenly squeaked, transforming into an odd looking reindeer guy, waving his hooves frantically trying to mouth something at Luffy, but Luffy didn't understand. "Baa-san?! I'm still a hail and youthful seventy!"

With that the old woman attacked, a giant axe appearing from what Luffy still thought of as hammer space at times, coming around in a wide arc to cut Luffy in half.

Luffy was still carrying Vivi, and he decided for the second time today he had once more had enough of just dodging around when her life was in danger. His punch flashed out, shattering the axe edge-on and then moving so quickly backwards that the woman had no time to react before he was holding the remains of the shaft,

wrenching it out of her grip. He then hurled the shaft behind him and glared at the woman.

The woman, for her part, stepped back with a faint smile on her face as she inspected Luffy once again from head to toe. "No ordinary pirate could've done that. Who are you, boy?"

"I'm Monkey D. Luffy, the man who will be the Pirate King!" Luffy said, then allowed his teeth to flash in a shark-like grin. "And you just threatened my crewmate! Now, are you the doctor or not!?"

"D., is it?" the woman stated, staring at him for another few seconds before looking down at the girl in his arms. Poison or some kind of infection, she diagnosed immediately, before turning away. "I'm Doctor Kureha boy. You've at least come to the right place. Bring her up to my room. We'll see what we can do for her."

Luffy nodded, looking over at the little creature as he made to follow the older woman. The little creature had gasped, going into something like shock as Luffy had dealt with Kureha's attack. "And you?"

The question seemed to shake the little guy out of his shock and he mumbled, "Tony-Tony Chopper," before rushing after the older woman.

Only a few seconds later Vivi was ensconced in a warm bed on the third floor as the doctor and Chopper worked on her. "Poison definitely, from a frog of South Fleria, the Tomasineri genus," the woman said, moving over towards a book then looking over her shoulder at Chopper. "How should we cure it?"

Chopper replied quickly, though he did not look happy, the reason for which he spoke aloud after responding to Dr. Kureha's question with some medical jargon Luffy couldn't follow. "But the actual medicine does have some short-term side effects, worse it's been a full day or more since she took the injury. The blood vessels and capillaries around the area struck by the dart will make her skin sore to the touch for a week or more. The medicine will also cause her to suffer a few convulsions occasionally over the next few days, and her eyesight will suffer for a few days."

"But she'll pull through?" Luffy asked, looking at the tiny reindeer.

The tiny reindeer nodded, not looking away from the patient. "She'll pull through."

Luffy nodded, watching as the two of them worked for a time in silence, then asked, "So, Devil Fruit of some kind, I'm guessing?"

The reindeer looked up, almost glaring at Luffy for a moment before turning back to his work as they began to create a medicine they would give Vivi and a poultice to put on the wound itself. He was creating the poultice while Dr. Kureha was creating the medicine. "Yes, I ate the human-human fruit when I was young. What's it to you?"

"Nothing, just wondering. You sure seem to know your stuff, Doctor Chopper."

"BAAKAA!" Chopper shouted in reply, actually dancing in place for a moment as he stood on the stool he had to use to reach the table. "Praising me like that won't make me happy!"

"You look plenty happy to me," Luffy deadpanned. "But have you ever been trained in hand to hand? Your moves were okay for an amateur, but you could do with a lot more training and experience."

"As if anyone would train a monster like me to do anything!" the little creature scoffed, shaking his head and stopping his dance. For a moment he was silent, then asked, "Are you really a pirate?"

"Yep," Luffy said with a grin.

"A real one?"

"Yep. I have a pirate flag, I have a bounty, I have a dream that I am willing to follow to the death even if it costs me that death. That is what makes a pirate," he said catching Chopper's eyes with his own and a grin. "Not taking whatever you want or plundering where you will, and not simply having a flag like your former king apparently does."

"Wapol?" Kureha asked at the same time as Chopper, both of them turning quickly to look at Luffy.

“Yeah, we met up with him this morning and gave him a bit of a beating, but we couldn’t stop to chase them down and finish the job.” Luffy watched as Chopper tensed, growling angrily under his breath.

“You got a problem with that fat tub of lard too, huh? Dalton mentioned how Wapol treated the people of this island, so that makes sense.”

Chopper and Kureha were both silent, unwilling to go into details of their very personal hatred for Wapol. The suicide of Doctor Hiluluk in his attempt to blow the king and his army up with him was a sore point for both of them despite the years that had gone by since. Kureha, however, nodded once as she turned her head to look at Luffy. “Well, at least you gave him a beating. Still, knowing he is still around the island’s zone makes me uneasy.”

“Understandable, though my crew’s on guard with the island’s militia to make sure they don’t come back.” Luffy continued to look at Chopper as he spoke, a small smile appearing on his face. *Decently strong, check. Interesting personality, check. Doctor’s skills, certainly sound like a check to me. And he seems to like pirates, so...* “Y’know, Chopper, you seem pretty interested in pirates. So, do you want to join my crew?”

“EHHHH!!” Chopper shouted, turning and jumping backward, smacking his back against the wall. “Who’d want to do that, baka? Never, baka!”

“Oy Chopper! Watch out! You nearly dropped the beakers!” Kureha shouted, then turned to look at Luffy as Chopper regained control of himself. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, boy, trying to recruit my apprentice to your crew right in front of me.”

“I’m a pirate whose dream is to be the Pirate King. Nerve should’ve been assumed... Baa-san.” Luffy replied, smirking.

Kureha twitched angrily, her hands tightening over her own beaker for a moment before she stomped over to the bed. “Bastard. You better be able to pay for this bit of medical magic we’re performing here, and I’m going to add at least half again to my bill for being a mouthy asshole!”

“Heh, I get that a lot,” Luffy replied, winking over at Chopper, who had to look away before he burst into chuckles. “But I was serious, y’know, Chopper. I think ya’d do really well with my crew. So long as you have a dream, that is?”

Chopper flushed, then looked away. “Of, of course I have a dream. But, but why would you want to, er... I mean, look at me. I’m short, I have a blue nose, I have horns and, and I change forms. I’m a monster!”

Pushing up her glasses Kureha glanced over her shoulder at Chopper before turning back to Vivi. *Let’s see how you handle this, D boy.*

Luffy cocked his head thoughtfully to one side, then shook his head. There was obviously a lot of pain in that word for the youngster, but Luffy wasn’t going to be able to get to the bottom of it in one conversation. “In terms of being a monster you’re not nearly strong enough to earn that name from me, and...” Luffy moved over to a nearby pail of water, pulling off his long coat as he did.

While Chopper, and now Kureha, watched, Luffy dumped the cold water over his head before shaking her hair out of her eyes and smirking at the two island natives. “Your body ain’t the freakiest thing I’ve ever seen, kid.”

“GAAHH! What the hell are you!?” Chopper shrieked, staring as Kureha stood up, moving forward, her eyes lighting up in interest.

“Don’t even think it, Doc. I’m not gonna let you poke and prod me. I’ve had it up to here with that reaction,” Luffy growled, raising a now somewhat smaller fist in the older woman’s direction. “It’s some kind of reaction to a Devil Fruit attack I was exposed to as a baby. Yes, it’s real. Yes, it’s a full body change. No, my mind doesn’t change.”

Luffy looked over at Chopper, her face serious. “I’ve been called a freak, a monster, hell, even an abomination in my time, though admittedly that last one only once. But let me tell ya the truth about such words, Chopper: they only have power if you let them. If you believe the words, they have power over you and the people who label you that way too. I’m fine with being called a freak; I’m fine with being a monster, as long as I’m still me up here.” The redhead tapped her forehead and her chest over her heart.

Chopper stared at him for a moment before turning like he was standing on a turnstile going back to his work. Luffy looked over at Kureha, who smirked at him, nodding her head before touching Vivi's forehead lightly, smiling slightly as her medicine had already begun to kick in, fighting back the poison.

Just then there was suddenly a loud explosion of sound in the distance, and Luffy twitched, heading towards the window and out leaping quickly. "Huh, looks like even an idiotic pig can get lucky once in a while."

"Wait, you idiot, we're three stories up!" shouted Chopper, racing towards Luffy while the doctor simply looked on.

Chopper watched as Luffy didn't drop from her jump, instead bounding up into the air. Luffy quickly spotted the second ship that had dropped anchor in the cove and the battle going on at the cliff. But from this distance she couldn't make out any details.

She hopped back down then through the window where Chopper stared at her. "W, what are you!?"

Luffy cocked her head, then smirked. "I told ya Chopper. I'm a monster." While Chopper stared, the redhead moved towards the bed. "Are you all right here? Only that Wapol guy's arrived and I'd like to get back to the rest of my crew just in case."

"What!" shouted Chopper, moving forward to stare up at Luffy. "He's back!?"

"From what I was able to see from here, yes. Now, if you'll excuse me..." With that Luffy turned away, only to stop as Chopper grabbed her leg.

"Wait, let me come with you!" the reindeer man shouted.

Luffy looked down at Chopper then over to Kureha, who nodded her head slightly. "All right then, climb up on my back and let's go."

With that Luffy turned around and once more leaped into the air and away. Kureha watched them go from her seat by the bed, frowning thoughtfully. "D, huh? A boy with that name, a dream like that, his skills and that charisma of his? Interesting.

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“How dare you! How dare you aim those shitty cannons of yours at the ladies!” shouted Sanji, flicking away his cigarette as he stared angrily at Wapol, literal fires in his eyes.

“That's what you're bothered about?” asked a few of the groaning militiamen around them. Surprisingly many of them were still alive, though battered and in no shape to fight.

“Sanji-kun, If you don't stop posing and do something I'm going to hit you!” Nami said sweetly, pushing herself to her feet and once again looking around for a makeshift weapon. *I really have to look into getting myself a new staff! Those shorts club things that Luffy called tonfa are okay, but I spent too long training with a staff to change now.* Both of her tonfa had been shattered during this fight, and she had been making do with shouting orders at the militiamen from behind their lines and using any weapon that came to hand.

“At your command, Nami-san!” he shouted in reply, spinning once to bow grandly to her before spinning away from another cannon blast which slammed into a tree right behind him. That sent splinters everywhere, but Sanji ducked and dodged in place for a moment, before launching himself forward despite how battered he was.

Despite his enthusiasm, however, at that moment it was just Sanji against all three of the attackers, and all he could do was just dodge around most of the time, keeping their attention on him. Wapol and Chess would stay at range firing cannon balls and arrows, while Kuromarimo would hurl his black afro balls, which did nothing unless ignited by a fire arrow from Chess, while keeping himself in between Sanji and his king. Sanji quickly found that his afro covered fists were actually quite strong.

Thanks to his training with Luffy, however, Sanji was able to dodge and set up an attack after ducking under a punch from Kuromarimo. “Mutton Shot!”

The kick slammed into the man and sent him flying backwards to smash into a few of the soldiers who had been climbing up the stairwell, throwing them all

backwards and off the cliff face. Smirking, Sanji then leaped over another cannon blast, which slammed into the ground where he had just been standing. "One down!"

Behind Sanji, Robin was able to finally gather her senses, pushing herself to her feet and crossing her hands over her chest, her eyes dark and angry. Over forty of the soldiers had ascended the cliff face by this point, though most of the others who had done so were already down by this point as well. These new troops would quickly join them.

Hundreds of hands began appearing all over them, grabbing their chins, lower legs, and arms, and then twisting them into shapes as she growled, "Mass Cuarenta Fleur, Clutch!"

Turning at the sounds of some forty spines shattering, Wapol gaped then twisted around swiftly, bringing his cannons arms to bear on Robin. "You fucking hippo!"

Unfortunately for Wapol, at that point Luffy and Chopper appeared on the scene in no uncertain fashion.

OOOOOOO

Having bounced far, far faster towards the sound of battle than she (at the time) had dared move with the sick Vivi, it hadn't taken long for Luffy to come within sight of the fighting, and now she came up with a plan to end it in one fell swoop as well as give Chopper a chance at a bit of revenge. And maybe to have a bit of fun at Chopper's expense. *That'll teach him to scream in my ear like that and nearly knock my hat off.* "Hey, have you ever heard of a dive bomber?"

"Um, no. What's that?" Chopper asked, still clinging to Luffy's back, his eyes slightly wild under his large hat.

In response Luffy reached behind her and pulled the little reindeer off her back, smirking at him. "You can change into that giant form whenever you want, right?"

"Yesss..." Chopper said slowly than his eyes widened as Luffy pulled back the arm that was currently holding him. "Wait, what the hell are you..."

Before he could continue Luffy hurled him down towards the battle like a large ball. Luffy followed Chopper down just as quickly, canceling her Geppo and simply plummeting for a bit, building up speed before twisting around and kicking off the air to add even more speed, zooming down at a diagonal now.

OOOOOOO

"You utter asshole! Guard Point!" a voice shouted from on high, causing everyone but Robin and Wapol to turn in that direction, even Sanji who had charged forward to try and stop Wapol from attacking Robin. Robin was busy dodging to one side while trying to conjure up hands on Wapol, but he was simply too big, and he shook off her attempts easily. He chomped at one of the hands, and she grimaced angrily, pulling them back in.

"Damn it, you stupid hippo, stay still and take your punishment!" Wapol was interrupted by a giant circular furry mass suddenly plummeting down onto him from above.

"Your Majesty!" Chess shouted, turning quickly but far too slowly. Wapol was borne to the ground so hard his frontal armor shattered along with a few of his ribs under the blow. Chopper had hit like a cannon ball of similar size, though Chopper was not hurt in turn at all thanks to his Guard Point.

Swiftly Chopper changed forms, shouting aloud, "Heavy Point!" Now instead of a ball of fur, he looked sort of like the original form he had worn when he had attacked Luffy back in the castle, only with less fur except round the throat and wrists, and with even more muscle.

A second later Chopper slammed a Heavy Point punch into the side of Wapol's head, sending the king's head lolling to one side with several broken teeth, before he hammered a few blows into the man's neck, not giving him any moment to try to activate his Devil Fruit power. To the side at the same time, Sanji engaged Chess in close, where Chess began to use twin axes to attempt to get through him to the king.

Wapol was tough, though, and his hands shifted suddenly into a giant axe in one hand and a giant hand in the other. The hand clamped down on Chopper's arm, holding him there against him as he pulled himself up onto his knees. "It's you! That beast that followed that stupid Hiluluk around! How dare you assault the king, you hippo! The punishment for that is death by indigestion!"

"Shut up! You, how dare you mock the doctor's sacrifice!" Chopper growled, trying to wrench his arm loose, but then he heard a whistling noise behind him.

Just as Wapol was about to chomp down on him, Chopper quickly shrunk back down and bounced away, and Luffy struck. With all the added momentum of her fall behind Luffy, the blow must have been like that of a giant even without Haki added to it. It shattered Wapol's entire face, hurling him backwards and out off the cliff face, past the inlet and out to sea, screaming in pain.

Landing quickly, Luffy leaped into the air again, hopping over the cliff herself to hover in the air over the two ships below. Luckily for the Straw Hats, Wapol's forces had been so busy trying to fight their way up onto the cliff and through the defenders that they hadn't attacked the Straw Hats' ship. Even Robin's turtle was still around, having ripped out half of the railing along one side and dropped down into the ocean.

Luffy took a moment to think that the turtle would be a bitch to get back aboard before turning her attention to the ship below her. "Rankyaku!" A few air pressure attacks lashed out, cutting through the masts and deep into the large ship's bulwarks, though Luffy's attack still couldn't cut through steel.

Behind him Sanji at last dealt with the increasingly frantic Chess, who had tried to break off their fight and run for it, either to get away or to chase after his king no one would ever know. Sanji's kick took him in the neck cleanly, breaking his neck and sending him boneless to the ground.

From down below a group of white smocked doctors rushed out onto the deck of the large ship, having been kept back until the fighting was done. They all now held up their hands. "We surrender! We surrender!"

Luffy paused in her destruction of the ship, then looked over at Chopper. "Who are these guys, Doctor Chopper?"

"Doctor?" Chopper said, then shrunk in place to his normal body, clapping his hooves together and dancing in place. "You bastard! Hearing that doesn't make me happy at all, you bastard!"

"You look happy enough to us," said more than one voice as Luffy laughed.

Chopper still quickly answered the question, and Luffy paused in her attack until the Ishi-20 had moved off the ship. Then Nami interrupted them from her position in the snow where she had ducked under a few stray afros shouting, "Wait, wait! Let me search it for treasure first."

Sighing, Luffy put a hand on Chopper's shoulder directing him over to the wounded. "You get started with that lot, especially that big guy, Dalton. I think it will be up to him and the rest of the militiamen how we treat these prisoners."

As Chopper nodded and raced off to the badly injured bison Zoan, Luffy turned to his crew, wincing slightly as he looked at Makino and Nami, then moved over to help Robin to her feet as Sanji did the same for Nami. "You three all right?"

"Toughness training," Makino said, shaking her head, wincing as she inspected her leg. "We're going to have to start toughness training. I know it will be painful, Nami, but those cannonballs were nowhere close to us, and the impact of the explosions took us both out of the fight far too easily."

"I guess I can agree to that," Nami said, looking over at Luffy. "Is Vivi okay?" she asked anxiously.

"Being seen to by doctor Kureha up at the castle. That explosion from earlier grabbed my attention, and me and Chopper hurried on down here."

Nami paused, looking between the wrecked ship below them and the castle, then sighed. "Would, would you mind taking me up?" Nami asked hesitantly, as if the words caused her actual physical pain. "I need to apologize to her."

"I don't think you do, but sure, as soon as your wounds have been attended to we can do that."

"Good," Nami replied, smiling for a moment before she turned and shouted at Sanji. "Sanji-kun, that means it's up to you to ransack that ship! I want our share of the loot, do you hear me!?"

"Hai, Nami-san! Leave it to me!" Sanji said, dancing in place, hearts coming into his eyes.

Rolling her eyes, Luffy looked around for a moment before frowning angrily. "Where's Zoro? Don't tell me he got lost and missed the fight. I would rib him so damn badly about that."

Having closed the distance between them Robin spoke up now, shaking her head. "He did not," she said before Makino could send a jibe at the swordsman. "He was actually still nearby, but I had detected the presence of a low-numbered agent and decided to see what was going on there. Swordsman-san came upon us moments after this battle began."

Luffy looked at her as did the others. "Negotiations broke down, I take it?" Luffy asked. What she was really asking was, "are your bridges burned," or something similar, but Robin still understood her.

"Quite so. I assume that Mr. 3 spotted Vivi when cook-san carried her to the town," Robin replied. "I put down Ms. Valentine, who was still alive apparently after your swordsman dealt with her partner on Cactus Island. Then the battle began here on the cliff face, and I decided my powers were better used doing crowd control than one-on-one." Robin gestured towards the dead or crippled soldiers lying in heaps all around the cliff face to illustrate her point.

"Sound thinking," Luffy said with a nod, still looking at the slightly older woman thoughtfully.

She sighed, then answered the rest of the redhead's question. "Yes, if word gets out that I dealt with Mr.3 so, my bridges will no doubt be very burned. However, other than Mr. 3, his partner, and Ms. Valentine, there were no witnesses, so hopefully that is not the case."

Luffy's eyes narrowed, but she eventually shrugged. *Robin really is desperate to keep her options open, though I doubt she really has. Still, best to let her figure that out on her own.* "Whatever floats your boat, I suppose. You've already given me more information about Crocodile and the rest than I had, so that's good enough for us for now."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Robin smiled at Luffy, thankful for her tolerance if not understanding.

"But still, I wonder where..." Luffy was interrupted as there was a furious tearing noise in the distance, and she turned in that direction, seeing a line of trees suddenly explode from some kind of blow, and then nodded. "I think we just found our swordsman. Excuse me a moment." With that she raced off in that direction, leaving the others to Chopper's mercies.

By this point Chopper had dealt with Dalton and raced over to Sanji, ordering the chef to sit down on the snowy ground. "Let me look at those wounds. Jeez, how are you even moving!?" Chopper shouted.

Watching the little creature work, Nami smiled suddenly. "So, you're a doctor then? What's your name?"

Chopper looked in her direction, but did not stop working, turning back quickly. "Tony Tony Chopper!" he replied brusquely.

"You're very good doctor," she said, watching as he flushed, but did not turn away from his work again. "How would you like to be part of our pirate crew?"

Now Chopper looked away, scowling slightly. "Your captain asked me the same thing. But, but don't my looks... I mean, look at me. I have horns and I'm a reindeer and, and I'm a monster!" he shouted, pretty much saying the same thing he had to Luffy.

“Kid, on a scale of one to ten in terms of monsters you're not even a three,” Sanji chuckled, shaking his head, before his head dipped, and storm clouds began to appear on his head. “Our captain though, he’s a freaking ten! He has this, this lovely little curse but, but what does he do with it!? Nothing!” With that Sanji fell down into a moaning and weeping pile.

While the girls simply shook their heads and Chopper looked on in bemusement, smiling as the crew, despite their injuries, began to josh and tease one another. It felt homey almost, and Chopper felt himself joining in.

OOOOOOO

With Zoro on him every moment, Mr. 3 could not break off to set up any traps. Even his suit of armor, Candle Champion, took time to mold around him, and Zoro didn't let up. However Mr. 3 had planted trap areas here and there throughout the forest, fake trees made of wax or rocks and other things. Some of them still had actual candles hidden within them which let loose Mr. 3's most insidious assault: tiny little pieces of wax which would stick to the targets of his assault, slowly encasing them in wax.

Most of the time he used that attack in large quantities against individuals already captured in his larger, more obvious wax assaults, but Zoro was too quick, and too strong too. Several dozen times Mr. 3 was able to catch one of Zoro's legs or arms in a candle lock only for him to shatter them swiftly. And his direct assaults, wax spears or hammers, simply didn't work. Even when he used them to try and cover Zoro's hands in the splash when Zoro cut through them, the swordsman hurled the bits and pieces of wax away from him.

For his part, Zoro was getting annoyed. Mr. 3's abilities were keeping him from getting a good shot in, and he was thinking on his feet to a degree he had never been forced to do before. And it was only the training he had received since meeting Luffy that allowed him to match his opponent's versatility. His strength, for one, was enough to break out of the wax, but more than that it was his speed and ability to

predict the splashes of Mr. 3's wax attacks that allowed him to keep up the momentum on Mr. 3.

Zoro frowned for a second, however, as he cut through another attack, staring at his arm before twitching to the side and around before lashing out with his own attack that forced Mr. 3 to change his next assault into a wall that just barely stopped the man from being cut into. This allowed Zoro to glare down at his arm where a thin veneer of wax was slowly forming. "Hmmf, more underhanded tricks, huh?"

"I prefer to think of them as winning strategies," Mr. 3 retorted, a smile appearing on his weary face. "Hah, can you feel it, Roronoa Zoro? Your limbs slowing down? My wax will eventually cover you entirely, and then...!"

"You talk too much," Zoro grunted, then steeled himself. "Tekkai!" As his body firmed up, all his muscles strained to the n^{th} degree, Zoro moved into one of the speed katas that Luffy had taught him.

There was a ripping noise, and he grimaced as pieces of the wax came off his limbs and chest, taking away bits and pieces of his snow jacket as his muscles and tendons strained further than he'd pushed them before. After all, Tekkai was never designed to be used on the move. You had to stand still for at least a short amount of time to use it. But Zoro had just broken that rule. He would pay for it later, but what did that matter to the first mate of the Straw Hats? He would deal with his injuries later.

Mr. 3 stared in shock as Zoro tore himself free of the wax veneer coating him, and nearly didn't dodge Zoro's next attack in time, ducking to one side as Zoro's blades slashed through where he had been standing, cutting deeply into his leg instead of his chest as had been Zoro's target. Frantically he called out, "Candle Surprise!" Reaching out with his power he liquidized the heretofore solid wax trees and rocks around them, snuffing out the candle's flame on some of them as he tried to capture Zoro.

The sheer amount of wax that came at him from every direction almost overcame Zoro's ability to dodge, since he still wasn't used to being able to use Geppo automatically in his personal style. The wave of wax nearly captured his feet before he pushed off the ground far enough to avoid it. Then for the next few seconds he was

busy cutting and hacking at the wax wave that still tried to envelop him, as well as keeping his feet in the air.

When he looked up Mr. 3 had readied his next technique. With his leg now bleeding and fearing returning to his employer with nothing to show for it, Mr. 3 decided to go for the kill now instead of trying to run away. He now stood across from Zoro, his body covered in a suit of armor with a massive chest and shoulders in comparison to rather scrawny legs. "Behold, Candle Champion! Your swords will matter not at all to this suit of my strongest, most reinforced wax! Its strength is like that of steel!"

"Oh ho," Zoro said, breathing hard even as his eyes glinted, pulling his bandana out and tying his hair down as he put Wado Ichimonji in his mouth. "In that case,, if I can cut you, then I've taken another step in my journey to cut steel!"

"Fool. I'll make you sorry you ever tried to fight a Baroque Works agent!" shouted Mr. 3, charging forward his arms and windmilling. "Candle Champion Charge!"

"Onigiri!" The two charged one another and met, with Zoro having ducked under Mr. 3's attacks, his blades flashing. Mr. 3's armor shattered, and his body was hurled out of the armor to land nearby. The wax had blunted enough of the cutting force such that he was only unconscious, bleeding severely, but not cut in two like his armor had been.

Breathing out, Zoro shook his arms out for a moment, the reverberations having got to them for a moment. *Still have a ways to go before cutting steel, I suppose, but it's definitely a step in the right direction.*

"Zoro!"

Zoro turned at that shout to see Luffy come out of the woods around the battlefield. She was carrying the little girl that was apparently Mr. 3's partner, who was trying to bite her with scant success, Luffy simply smirking at her. "You have any idea why this one was running away from Carue?"

"Keep that thing away from me!" the girl cried, leaving off her attempts to bite Luffy's hand and nearly scrabbling out of her grip as the duck appeared out of the woods behind them.

Zoro nodded, waving one sword at the duck. "Head back to the ship," he ordered before looking back at Luffy. "Let's just say that she thinks ducks are weird creatures for some reason. Don't know what that's about, but it's enough to scare her."

"Not even going to ask," Luffy chuckled as the girl calmed down. He looked over at Mr. 3, then shrugged, tossing the girl underhand toward Zoro who quickly put his swords away to catch her, glaring at his captain. "I'll grab this one, and we'll drop them both off with Dalton and the others."

No one on the ground noticed that high in the sky a vulture circled. On its back was an otter, drawing on a small notepad furiously for a few moments before winging away over the ocean.

OOOOOOO

Nefertiti Vivi woke up groggily, shaking her head slightly. "Where, where am I? Why can't I... My eyes!"

"Calm down Vivi," said Luffy from beside her, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Chopper?"

"Your eyes will be fine. It's just a side effect of the cure for the poison you had in your system. It will leave your system soon."

Vivi calmed down quickly, blushing at Luffy's touch on her shoulder which had now moved to ruffle her hair. "Thank you, doctor"

"Baka!" Chopper, who she had yet to actually see, muttered, sounding extremely happy to her ears. "Calling me a doctor like that. It won't make me happy, baka!"

"And that's three for three," Luffy joked, pushing Chopper lightly as he stood up. "For now, take it easy, Vivi. You'll be right as rain soon. Until then, Nami wants to talk to you."

Nami quickly took Luffy's place by Vivi's bed, taking the other girl's hand in hers and leaning her head against Vivi's as she began to talk. "Hey Vivi, how're you feeling, girl? Other than the whole blind thing, I mean."

As the two girls talked quietly, Luffy led Chopper out of the room to watch Zoro and Sanji carrying in some of the treasure the chef had taken from Wapol's ship. Their share of the loot would be going to paying Kureha for her aid with Vivi, and they wouldn't be enriching themselves off this any further than that despite Nami's protests to the contrary. "So can we transfer her to the ship?"

"Yes, you'll be able to transfer her easily enough, though you'll need to set up her bed so that she won't be able to toss and turn at night. Her injury will be severely sensitive for a time," Chopper said with a nod, looking at Luffy thoughtfully before looking down at his hooves, his voice a low mumble. "Are you, were you serious about...? That is..."

"What are you talking about, me setting her bed up? You're the doctor. You're going have to be the one to do that, aren't you?" Luffy asked with a smirk, patting Chopper on top of the head.

Chopper smiled pulling his hat down over his eyes, then turning away and going to look for Doctorine without another word.

End Chapter

This chapter fought me every step of the way. I had to have a few of the events occur as they did in canon, at least the frame of them anyway, which I always find rather stifling on the tactical level. I also didn't want Luffy to be the center of the fighting this chapter. Still, I am generally speaking happy with it.

Katherine is a made up name for Miss Goldenweek. The wiki does not list her real name. I made up the uncle thing too. It just made sense to me.

Yes, I made no mention about how the three prisoners were dealt with. I did this purposefully in an effort to cut down on the world building. Doing so leaves some loose ends, of course, but that matches the original.

I also did not go into the ending scene with Doctorine and Chopper's confrontation. I

think all told I wouldn't have to change anything there, so it would have been pointless. Despite these issues, I hope everyone enjoyed the chapter and are looking forward to the next chapter! I think I'm going to use it for character interaction and training, then end it as they reach Alabasta.