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This has been edited by Tomon, Hiryo, and been double-checked by me via Grammarly. Hopefully, between me, Tomon and Hiryo, there won't be any mistakes that ruin your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 23: Frozen War, Heady Surprises

Charging forward, Luffy shouted, "Run!" even as his hands gleamed with the black of Busoshoku, and he crashed bodily into the Marine admiral. Or who he had thought was the admiral anyway. By the time he crossed the distance between them, the other man's 'body' had faded down into a quickly forming sheen of ice under their feet, leaving behind an ice sculpture where his physical body had been. As Luffy crashed through it, Aokiji reappeared.

For a moment, Aokiji disregarded Luffy to concentrate on the real threat, that his original target would once more flee. "You will not be escaping me today, Nico Robin." The ice flowed along the ground in every direction from freezing Robin and Zoro's feet to the ground but missed Luffy thanks to the quick use of Geppo. Yet despite seeing this out of the corner of his eye, Aokiji still kept his eye on Robin, knowing how tricky she was, flowing up out of the ice to one side of Robin, reaching out for her.

"I don't think so! 36-Pound Cannon!" Zoro roared, lashing out with the one-sword version of his air pressure attack.

Aokiji's body of ice shattered, but just like with Luffy a moment before, Aokiji's mental presence was gone by the time the air pressure attack crossed the fifteen feet between him and Zoro. He reformed, only to duck and then use Kami-E to back away from a furious assault from Luffy, whose hands were still the black of Busoshoku. "Mah, mah," Aokiji murmured, trying to push his mental presence back down into the ice, which he was slowly spreading everywhere around them.

But before he could, Luffy's foot blackened with Busoshoku, flashing in a low kick towards Aokiji's legs. Aokiji was not a foot fighter in any way, despite being decent with Geppo and the rest of the Rokushiki. Nor did he anticipate the attack, not yet consciously using his Kenbunshoku. And as he blocked the kick with his own Busoshoku, Aokiji was forced to remain in his own body for a second.

A second was all Luffy needed, and a hand flashed up towards Aokiji's head. *This is no fucking time to hold back anything!* That hand was suddenly holding the end of Smoker's weapon, the tip that had a bit of Seastone in it.

For a moment, the stick thumping against Aokiji's chest didn't register. Then his body began to weaken at the touch of Seastone. "CRapp!" That was all he got out before a blow from Luffy's once-more Busoshoku clad fist crashed into the side of the admiral's jaw.

Instead of fighting the motion, Aokiji let it carry him away from that damnable Seastone. Watching this, Luffy reflected that it had been a mistake. *Freaking Jutte is too damn unwieldy! I need to cut it down.* With Aokiji busy rolling away, Luffy took a moment to do just that, bending and then tearing the tip of the jutte off, tossing the rest of the weapon away before racing forward again.

Landing, Aokiji rolled across the ground before coming up and creating a series of ice walls between himself and Luffy, shaking his head. *Damn, but this youngster can hit! I've been hit harder, of course, but even so, a youth like him... well, now I know why Doberman lost. Huh, what's...* Feeling around in his mouth for a moment, Aokiji then spat out not one, but the bits of several broken teeth, shaking his head once more as his previously lazy eyes narrowed in anger. "It's on now, boy!"

A second later, Luffy began to dodge incoming ice spikes coming at him from every direction. When they struck, the ice started to spread, hastening the environment's change from a normal summer island's forest to a frozen wasteland. The trees either were quickly covered by frost and then ice or shattered at the sudden change of temperature.

Luffy was able to dodge five or six at a time, smashing those that would otherwise hit him. His fists and feet flashed so fast that Robin, her eyes wide from where she had nearly been frozen, could not even see his hands move. Zoro was able to but barely, a sign of his greater training, but after a brief second spent watching and once more realizing he wasn't up to this level of combat, Zoro turned to Robin, grabbing the older woman and tossing her over his shoulder. "Come on, woman, we're a weakness our captain doesn't need right now."

Even encumbered by Robin, who had yet to tear her eyes away from her boyfriend and her nightmare fighting one another, the first mate was ready a second later when Aokiji again tried to attack him and Robin, smashing the ice coming their way and still retreated quickly. "You better beat his ass, Luffy! No way is my captain weak enough to lose to some lazy ass bastard of an Admiral!"

Seeing this, Aokiji, who had shifted through the ice once more, came up with a plan to, at the very least, deprive the brat of his Seastone club. He formed his body once more, using Kami-E to close with the two fleeing pirates. "I told you, you will not get away this time, Nico Robin!"

As the admiral had expected, Luffy came after Aokiji, who felt him coming. *You're not the only one who has tricks up his sleeve, boy!* Twisting at the last minute, Aokiji grabbed at the metal club, his arm black with Busoshoku. The power of the Armor-type Haki was such that it blocked out the touch of the Seastone, while ice flowed up his arm from beyond the black of the armor, covering their joined hands and freezing the club to the point it would have been painful for anyone not using Busoshoku to hold onto.

Seeing that, Luffy cursed, and Aokiji raised one sardonic eyebrow. "I am an Admiral, Pigtail. Did you honestly think that I wouldn't know Busoshoku? All marines have to know it before they can rise to the rank of admiral."

"Meh, I kinda figured," Luffy grumbled, and then a huge spear of ice rose out from directly within Aokiji's body, crashing into Luffy. He grimaced, but his armor technique took the hit as he returned a blow from his own armor-clad fists and feet. Being stuck like that in one place was not something he liked, but he refused to let go of his weapon, the one thing he had in his repertoire that might end this fight.

However, Aokiji was indeed an Admiral, and his own Busoshoku-covered body took the best hits Luffy could give out. Meanwhile, the steel surrounding the tiny bit of Seastone in Luffy's makeshift club shattered under the intense cold Aokiji's arm was giving out, which was enough that Luffy was starting to lose feeling in that hand despite his Haki usage. *Damn it, trick number two!*

Using their ice-clad hands as a pivot, Luffy leaped up mule-kicking the admiral with feet gleaming with Busoshoku. Aokiji took it stoically with his black-armored body, yet the momentum of the double kick was such that he was off balance a second later as instead of following up with the obvious roundhouse, somehow, Luffy used that impact to flip up and over Aokiji, lashing down with some kind of technique that Aokiji had never seen before. "Moko Takabisha!"

The blue-gold attack crashed into a hasty ice wall, smashing through it with ease, but by the time the beam reached Aokiji himself, he had shifted his form into ice. He grimaced a little as the hit tore through him a bare heartbeat before he had shifted into ice, retaliating with a series of ice spears which grew as fast as lightning and then launched themselves up towards Luffy, who had gained some distance and freed himself from the block of ice around his hand.

As he did so, Aokiji took a brief instant to look around, his thick lips twisting into a frown as he noticed that the other two pirates were gone, disappearing out past the edge of the now entirely frozen copse of trees. Even through his ever-expanding ice, he couldn't sense them. *Quite fast, that swordsman. I'll have to push my ice out further.*

This brief second of inattention on the others cost him, as a kick landed right in his face, sending him flying. Aokiji flipped himself in midair, bouncing there for a second via Geppo, showing that his head had grown some black armor at the last instant to protect himself from the blow. "My my, you really are dangerous, aren't you?" Aokiji murmured. "Able to close with me so fast and strike so hard..."

"Yep, I'm so dangerous that if you take a single moment to look anywhere else, but at me, I'll smash your head off!" Luffy growled. "This is between you and me, a fight between Admiral and captain."

Aokiji seemed to think about it, then shrugged, a wry smile on his face. "If that's what you want, I can at least accommodate you that much. None of the rest of your crew are as dangerous as you are, and without you, they'll probably break up, anyway."

"I think you'd be surprised, not that that's unusual for ya today, is it?" Luffy taunted, accompanied by a grin without any actual humor in it. Indeed, there was even a hint of a tooth there, so it was more of a snarl than anything else for all his jocular tone. "But I also think you're putting the chicken before the egg man. Ya gotta beat me first!"

"So I do," Aokiji chuckled, amused despite himself at the youth's bravado. He gestured to either side of him then crashed his large hands together. At this gesture, the ice all around them flowed, thrusting towards Luffy like so many living spears of ice.

Fearlessly, Luffy charged forward, faster than before, his feet leaving a set of cracked footprints in the ice under him as he zoomed forward using a combination of Soru and Geppo, remaining just off the ground instead of touching down on the ice now. He also smashed the ice all around him easily, even though Aokiji was now making the ice as hard and as dense as he could, instead of merely playing around with the boy as he had at the start of the battle. His missing teeth showed that was not a good idea. *Sorry Garp-san, but I think this grandson of yours is going to make me get serious.* With that thought, the temperature all around Aokiji started to drop as he moved forward towards the charging Luffy, his own movement slow and measured, with one foot always on the ground, creating still more ice.

A second later, Aokiji dipped his head to the right, then took a step to the side and ducked over another blow. He smacked a third punch up over his shoulder, whistling at the strength of the strike, which created a shockwave all around them that shattered the ice and the ice-covered trees like glass. "But can you take a punch?" Aokiji murmured, returning a jab so fast Luffy couldn't dodge.

It sent Luffy reeling a little, even as his own Busoshoku protected them from any real damage. When he attacked again, Aokiji gave way, smirking as the ice all around them closed in, Aokiji himself disappearing into the ice. The temperature had dropped so much by now that their breath was now visible in the air, and if Luffy even touched the ice, he would find himself frozen to it instantly. "Ice Crush."

Roaring, Luffy smashed his fists and feet down onto the ground shouting in anger as the ice came at him, shattering the ice underneath him. He then reached to one side and grabbed at a tree, tearing it out of the ground and hurling it at Aokiji, who smashed it to one side, not even breaking his concentration, the ice all around them rising towards Luffy.

The fact it was so fast and coming at him from every side equally limited his abilities, but Luffy was fast enough to keep bouncing up, high up into the sky, only to find Aokiji there. The two of them fought in the air for a time, both of their bodies the black of Busoshoku. And now that he was taking this fight seriously, Aokiji was using his Kenbunshoku, predicting where

Luffy's strikes were going. Luffy was still moving so fast the Lazy Justice admiral was having trouble keeping up, but even so, this lessened the impact his Haki was being forced to take.

At first, this seemed to be the right thing to do, but as the fight wound through the air, their attacks creating shockwaves fit to shatter a normal person's eardrums, Aokiji realized to his astonishment that Luffy's mastery of Geppo was just as good as his own. To make it even stranger, his ability to move, manipulate momentum and fight in the air was simply superlative, and he was now using those strange energy attacks every so often. Worse, there was something else going on at the same time. *Is he using Kenbunshoku too?*

As the fight continued from one minute to the next, Luffy began to analyze his opponent's style. It was only barely noticeable yet, but Aokiji had decades of experience to call on and noticed almost at once. Not that this helped stop more of Luffy's punches from landing. *Time to change strategies...*

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Back at the Resolve, Nami and the rest of the crew had noticed the spreading ice from beyond the trees with some alarm, Zoro and Robin running ahead of it. "What's going on!?" Nami shouted, staring over their heads as, in the distance, booming noises seemed to carry from within the forest.

"Get the ship ready! We need to cast off, now!" Zoro shouted, while behind him, the ice continued to spread, building up into the sky.

Moments later, the Resolve had upped anchor and moved away from the island. Keeping it in sight as they started to circle this portion of the Long Ring Long Land Island. Thankfully, Nami could see that the Grand Line's unpredictable weather wasn't going to dump anything unusual on them just yet this far into the island's summer weather system. But even here, the cold was noticeable, and she shook her head in some awe and fear as she stared at the island. "An admiral, a freaking admiral!? What unlucky star have we..."

Nami broke off, looking over at Robin. Not wanting to make the woman feel any worse than she might be already, Nami moved over, giving her a hug. "Hey, don't worry, this bastard isn't going to be as tough as Enel-aho, right?"

"No. He'll be worse," Robin said flatly before clenching her mouth tightly. Normally, Robin would produce some kind of grisly prediction as to what could happen to the people involved, but since Luffy was literally fighting Aokiji for her sake, the very idea seemed wrong to her at the moment.

"Wait a minute!" Makino shouted from where she was sat in her wheelchair, feeling very frustrated and useless at present. "What about Tonjit and Shelly? That ice is covering the whole island."

Sanji pointed to one side. "You mean these two?"

Looking up from where he and his horse had been sharing tea, Tonjit blinked. "Yes?"

"He's already here... you know what, never mind," Makino grumbled as the rest of the crew started to pull up the anchor and pull the ship away from the shallows around the high cliff of the Long Ring Long Land Island.

With the Resolve once more in deep water, the crew all stared as the ice continued to flow out, covering the entire island, while above, the sound of the battle resounded. Nami also idly noticed that the remnants of the Foxy Pirates, those who hadn't been deemed important enough to bring in, were also making a run for it, though, from the deck, she couldn't make out any further details.

Chopper stared with dismay towards the ice floe gradually growing out of the island, its top being continually shattered and remade. "Wh, what's going on, can any of you see? I can't even see either of them!"

"The battle's moved deeper into the center of the island. I can't make anything out either," Zoro grunted.

Nami, though, bit her lip. "I, we're going to need to push out away from this lip of the island for a bit. We'll keep it within sight, but I want to put a bit more distance between us and the island, just in case. Sanji, grab a spyglass, you're up top. I'll take the wheel. Chopper bring out the Waver, just in case. Robin, Laki, sails." As she spoke, a wind started to pick up, the sudden coldness of the ice taking over the island affecting the local weather. She looked around at the crew, scowling when no one moved. "**Get going!**" she roared.

At that, all of them, even Robin, jumped to obey their navigator.

OOOOOOO

The marine admiral and pirate captain continued to exchange punches and kicks, with both liberally using Kami-E and Soru to dodge their enemy's blows. Each time a blow landed, a booming crash of noise abounded, and the ice nearby shivered or even shattered at the shockwaves they created. But in the air, Aokiji was now slowly getting the worst of it. Thanks to his mastery of Busoshoku, although more of Luffy's blows were landing, Aokiji had yet to really feel them. But he was starting to feel concerned. *Where in Davy Jones's locker did a pirate with a Haki like this come from?* He thought bemusedly, *And is it just me, or is his Kenbunshoku getting better?*

He didn't realize that Luffy was using an entirely different thing. In the middle of a fight was not a time when Luffy wanted to deal with the headaches that his attempts to use the Kenbunshoku created. Instead, Luffy was learning Aokiji's martial arts style.

Right, I think I've gotten a handle on Ice Afro's style now. A large amount of grappler, a very damned good boxer, some Aikido, but not enough. And he only ever uses his legs to defend occasionally, Geppo and Soru. An oddly straightforward style, given how dangerous his ice power makes him.

With that, Luffy deflected an attempt to grab his arm, blocked a jab and then Aokiji's giant, the long-fingered hand just behind the thumb when it went for another hold, twisting hard. It was only Busoshoku that kept him from breaking the thumb, and even then, Aokiji winced and was unable to dodge an elbow blow as Luffy used that hold to come up and over the admiral's outstretched arm. The blow made his head rock back, but Aokiji was able to break the other man's grip and then block the next kick that came his way, although Luffy had somehow changed its trajectory to smash into his own elbow. Even covered in Busoshoku, that stung.

Shit, this kid's just too quick to adapt. With that, Aokiji gestured towards the ground, and the ice below them rose to meet his descending feet, so fast Luffy blinked in shock. "Time to ground you, Pigtail." With that, he started to shift back into ice form, launching more and more ice at Luffy, all the while the edge of the ice flow, which had now covered the island from one side to another, started to close in.

Luffy snarled but cut back on his use of Busoshoku, using bones and unenhanced skin to smash the ice spears to pieces as he dodged through them, his thoughts running in some way parallel lines to his opponents. *Fuck, if I could keep the pressure on, I might have forced him to back off, this old guy's too smart for my own good. Still, I bet I can still surprise him.* With a tight grin on his face, Luffy began to use his ki sense. "Found you!"

If Aokiji currently had eyes, they would have widened as the ice directly in front of where his consciousness was hiding among the ice flow shattered. The next second, Luffy actually smashed into his chest, hurling Aokiji out of his makeshift defenses. And yes, his eyes were now very wide. *Okay, how the hell did he do that? While he's shown an ability to keep up with my style before this, that's a far cry from having achieved the level of Kenbunshoku he'd have to have to predict my moves! Hell, even someone like the pirate Katakuri wouldn't be able to predict where in the ice my mental presence is from one moment to the next!*

It was actually almost simple for Luffy to use his ki sense to find the taller man. Regardless of how much ice Aokiji created, his own ki didn't permeate the ice. And unlike light, ice didn't have its own's energy to boggle his senses. So Luffy kept on smashing the ice to pieces to get to the man within, even as he felt his ki reserves start to dip.

Growling, Aokiji backed away once more, shifting his consciousness down into the deepest part of the ice as the rest raced for Luffy. This didn't work as well as he'd hoped as Luffy shouted out, "I'm going to find you eventually!" and launched a Busoshoku infused axe kick to the ground, shattering the ice flow all the way down to the original ground of the island.

The entire edifice of ice shattered, but it bought Aokiji's consciousness enough time to move to one side. Then, even as the center of the ice floe shattered into a billion pieces, the sides crashed in with all the unstoppable weight of an admittedly thin glacier faster than most people could have moved.

Luffy cursed, but then began to try and escape, hopping upwards once more with a mixture of Soru and Geppo, the ice closing in from all sides. Even Luffy knew that he couldn't survive being caught by that ice. There was no time to concentrate on Aokiji, which proved to be a mistake.

As Luffy hurled himself up and out of the crashing ice flows, they began to merge together, molding like clay instead of ice. He landed on top, and for just a moment, gaped at how high he was, the ice having climbed to the height of Drum Mountain at least.

Then, he turned, his eyes widening as he tried to use Geppo to clear the top of the ice. But Aokiji was already there, his body coming up out of the ice even faster than the glaciers had crashed together. He grabbed him from behind, an arm around the shorter man's throat, and the other hand coming up to press palm down on against Luffy's face. And even if he had been covered in Busoshoku, it wouldn't have mattered a bit. "Ice Time."

Instantly, Luffy's body started to freeze from the point of contact outwards. He tried to get away and nearly fought Aokiji off, but his earlier assessment of the admiral was right: his style was predominately grappling, and he knew exactly how to lock in a hold. Worse, the cold instantly began to take Luffy's strength away, deadening his neck and face, making his thoughts slow...down... while Aokiji's body shifted to ice from the waist down, and the ice below rose to encapsulate the two of them in its freezing embrace.

Luckily for Luffy, thanks to the amount of ki he had, he ran more than a bit hotter than most. So even as the ice consumed him, he had enough mental capacity left to think about what to do. *No hope for it. I have to use the Soul of Ice, and... hope...*

Aokiji shifted his presence through the ice, a portion of its bulging up and away from the side of the makeshift glacier to form his body once more, which became merely flesh and bone a second later, as he stepped away from the tip of the glacier, where Luffy was now frozen.

Well, that was quite a bit tougher than I expected at first, Aokiji thought, the brat hit hard, but he seems to have underestimated my abilities with my powers and overestimated his own with Busoshoku. Odd that it never faded though, he only started to use it more sparingly. Could the kid not have rebuilt his reserves from fighting the lightning user? Well, regardless...

He turned his back on where Luffy's lay, frozen forever in that ice, moving to the side of the glacier to stare out to sea. "Ah, there's Hina, and over there's the pirate vessel, mah, he really did steal a Marine frigate. That's rather humiliating, Smoker-kun. Still, Luffy did make me promise, and I will keep my..."

Before he finished speaking, Aokiji whipped around as a booming noise reverberated across the entire island. The iceberg, massive things easily several times wider than the island and as big as the famous mountains of Drum Island, shook, then the ice at its tip shattered, creating a massive series of cracks throughout the ice. A second later, Luffy pushed portions of the ice out of his way, staring blankly at Aokiji, as he leaped down to be even with him.

“How! How did you do that?” Something in Luffy’s expression made Aokiji take a step backward even while he continued to question the pirate captain. It was like staring into the depths of the ocean or a blank mask. There was nothing human or living in that gaze. “Even someone in wrapped in Busoshoku should’ve been frozen.”

“Soul of Ice, Perfect Form,” Luffy intoned, his voice too leached of anything that even remotely sounded human to the marine admiral. “Your attempts to freeze me will no longer work.”

Narrowing his eyes, Aokiji tried to think of how something like that could’ve been accomplished. But then Luffy was launching himself forward, his arms and legs once more covered with Busoshoku, and Aokiji had no more time to ponder the strangeness of what it just occurred. So on the backfoot was he, Aokiji didn’t try to get away by merging back into his ice, merely using Busoshoku against Busoshoku.

But Aokiji was an Admiral, and if there was one thing that all at that rank have in common, it was an intense amount of willpower and experience. Luffy had willpower in spades, but this was the first time he had run into someone who could really match him, armor to armor. Earlier it was Luffy’s aerial abilities that were making the match go his way. Now that Aokiji knew about that skill, Aokiji simply backed away each time Luffy tried to take to the air.

Instead, he moved back and forth across the new glacier, each missed blow shattering the ice further, giving Aokiji more weapons to hurl at Luffy. The man who championed the idea of Lazy Justice wasn’t holding anything back physically any longer either, and the blows rained fast and furious in every direction.

Eventually, Luffy’s armor started to crack, his ki starting to give. Worse, while Luffy was able to predict his enemy’s movements to a certain extent, Aokiji was still able to use Kenbunshoku. Using that skill, Aokiji slowly adapted to Luffy’s ability to read the admiral’s combat style, and thus was changing it up from one moment to the next as best he could, moving unpredictably as possible.

A blow flowed into a weakness in Luffy’s defenses in what should’ve been a killing blow. But even without Busoshoku covering his stomach, Luffy was tougher than Aokiji had predicted, and as his blow landed for just a second, Aokiji’s Kenbunshoku failed him. Luffy was thus able to grab his outstretched arm, flipping upwards, and wrapping his black-clad legs around Aokiji’s middle. Luffy’s eyes were still blank and dead as his arms flung out behind him, then came in, a strange new kind of energy different than that of before appearing around his claw-like fingers

aimed toward Aokiji's chest right above where Luffy's legs were wrapped around the other man.

His instincts and Kenbunshoku both screaming a warning at him, Aokiji had to cancel his Busoshoku to dodge into the ice. This allowed him to dodge the strange attack. But his presence was still in the ice directly below where Luffy had latched onto him, and not a minute later, an armor-infused kick that was so strong, it shattered through the ice, smashing into Aokiji's head.

Aokiji started to see double even as he desperately sunk into the ice once more, covering his retreat with dozens of ice spears as he shifting away rapidly. As he ran, his thoughts returned to an earlier point he felt now bore repeating. *Dangerous, this youngster is extremely dangerous. What was that attack!?*

After his head stopped ringing, Aokiji went on the attack once more. From within the ever-expanding glacier, he launched ice attacks at Luffy, watching them shatter, then closing in through the ice with his own Busoshoku over his hand, thrusting towards Luffy's back hard. Luffy turned, blocking the blow, and again they started to trade punches and kicks, shifting this way and that, neither giving an inch.

As he touched down after a Soru, Luffy soon found himself encased in ice, but this time, Aokiji wasn't hadn't tried to freeze him. Instead, he simply encased him in it, trying to limit his ability to move.

More ice came down from above like a giant hammer, cracking down into the ground followed by an attack from below. Luffy grunted just once, then freed himself a second before an ice spear nearly took his head off, slicing deeply into his shoulder and neck. *I am losing this battle*, Luffy thought, even as he redirected some of his ki into healing,

Seeing this, Aokiji blinked, staring at the rapidly healing wound in surprise, even as he once more directed his ice to attack, and this time in a wider angle attack. The ice rose all around them, but Luffy had twisted at the last second, grabbing Aokiji's foot, which was once more in his ice form, rather than armor form, and his kick flashed up and into Aokiji side, just before he could armor himself against the hit.

Aokiji felt a rib go and was hurled backward before righting himself in midair via Geppo. Scowling angrily, the logia user held his side with one hand, shaking his head. "Dangerous, you are far too dangerous!"

Even as he retreated from Luffy's charge, Aokiji gestured, and all around them, the massive ice floe once more came alive.

In the cold analytical frame of mind that the Soul of Ice had forced him into, Luffy knew he was losing this fight now. *I can't win this, battered as I am, and with my ki reserves still not*

up to where they were before I fought Enel. But that had never really been his objective in this fight. Oh, Luffy had wanted to see where he stood against an Admiral, but even as he had protected Robin, Luffy knew that he couldn't outright win this fight, not unless he got really lucky. And if he won, that might well have spelled disaster for his crew, as the marines would be sure to respond.

No, I just had to hold him off, make him work for it enough that he won't come after us. Mission accomplished now. And I can see the Resolve out there. Good, Zoro and Nami kept their heads.

Of course, Luffy could well have run earlier. But while in the Soul of Ice, Luffy was no longer feeling its impact on his psyche, the former martial artist still had more than a bit of Ranma in him: and one thing he had never been good at was admitting that he was out of his depth. Now he began to retreat, moving toward the ocean, which was presently well away and down from their current position.

Seeing this, Aokiji grimaced, shaking his head. "You think after all this, I'll just let you go? That's just cheating," the older man grumbled, and he suddenly flashed forward using his own mastery of the six techniques, closing quickly.

Thanks to that and his own depleting ki, Luffy couldn't open up the range again. And the last thing that Luffy wanted was to lead him back to the Resolve. *Time to pull out one last trick.*

As they closed with the top of the ocean, Luffy dropped suddenly out of the sky, just canceling his technique entirely. At the same time, one foot lashed out and down into the ocean, kicking up a splash of ocean water so high it nearly looked like the wave of a tsunami.

Aokiji smirked, figuring that this was a move of desperation, and instantly lowered the temperature in the direction of the wave coming towards him, freezing it solid then hopping up and over it to land on top of it, shaking his head as he looked down at Luffy. Or where Luffy had originally been.

But Luffy was gone.

"What the hell!!!? Did he deep dive under the water? No, I'd have been able to feel him freeze underneath," Aokiji muttered, for the first time in this battle entirely on the back foot mentally.

Suddenly, his Kenbunshoku blared a warning, and he ducked, turning to stare as Luffy appeared out of thin air behind him.

And with it in his hand, he held the piece of Seastone from Smoker's Jutte in his clenched fist. It had been freed from its icy prison at some time during the battle, then simply

carried up on top of the building ice as the battle went on. Aokiji had never noticed it, but thanks to the Soul of Ice, Luffy had.

An open palm holding the bit of Seastone slammed into Aokiji, and he cursed as he felt his body slowly start to weaken, only his use of Busoshoku keeping him on his feet, even as another rib shattered under the thrust. Something inside was nicked, too, and Aokiji felt himself starting to weaken. But thanks to his Busoshoku, the tiny bit of Seastone couldn't weaken him as badly.

With the Seastone pressed between his palm and his enemy's chest, Luffy's hand clamped on, his fingers like claws, while Luffy's other hand launched out the attack from the Loud Thief Technique. *Time to find out if Busoshoku works against vorpel blades.*

Once more, Aokiji's instincts screaming at him and with a desperate effort, Aokiji broke Luffy's grip on him. He then frantically dodged by the skin of his teeth, having created enough distance from the Seastone to shift his body into ice just in time to avoid being turned into mince, the attack moving on to carve into the ice around them in every direction, so much so that Aokiji, still not understanding what the attack was, knew it. *My god, could even Busoshoku stop that attack!?* While that should have been impossible, his Kenbunshoku was screaming at him that it was a possibility and Aokiji was unwilling to chance it. Instead, he filled the air once more with ice attacks, wary of being snuck up on again.

This disrupted Luffy's attempt to disappear back into the Umi-Sen-Ken, and he wasn't able to dodge as the ice underneath him grew. Resembling the maw of a beast, the ice lunged for Luffy's foot, the jaws slamming closed with so much speed and strength that even Luffy's insane level of durability was overcome, breaking bones and tearing tendons.

Any other person would have screamed in pain, and even in the Soul of Ice, Luffy let loose a hiss of agony as his foot became so much powerless flesh. Losing control of his Geppo, Luffy flailed down towards the ocean below.

But as Aokiji once more froze the ground under him into hundreds of spears reaching up towards Luffy, Luffy used one arm and then his one remaining leg to perform Geppo, halting his descent. Then he was away once more, using Soru and Geppo to put distance between them, turning to watch Aokiji as he backed away, glaring at him all the while, almost daring him to come after him.

Aokiji stared back, then raised one hand and scratched at his Afro, shaking his head as the other arm rested on his battered chest. "Mah, mah, what an adaptable fellow. With one very large bag of tricks."

As he watched, Luffy began to use his leg again, slowly but still visibly able to perform Geppo with a foot that should have been ruined by that last attack. *And what is with that healing ability of his?*

Now, the marine admiral could have followed Luffy easily, could have indeed killed Luffy. But his two broken ribs, missing teeth and general somewhat battered feeling told him that Luffy would make him pay for it. And Aokiji was not willing to do so. Not until he discovered if, perhaps, Robin had finally found a crew worth Saul asking him to let her live.

At the same time, Aokiji ruefully conceded that he was also kind of rusty. Fighting someone else with Busoshoku and who surpassed him in speed, and who could somehow sense him in his ice, was... well, it had been far harder than he expected. *I might have to retrain myself a bit, I think.*

With that, Aokiji moved away, letting Luffy go.

Staring after Aokiji, Luffy shook his head just once. *Was the fucker even serious, or was this all some kind of test!? Regardless, if he comes after Robin again... well, that fight won't go as he thinks.* Then, feeling both grateful and extremely annoyed at how badly he had been overmatched, Luffy turned away, moving towards the ship as he finally released the Soul of Ice.

This was a mistake. All the pain and exhaustion his body had been feeling roared into Luffy's mind, and his final reserves faded instantly, causing Luffy to lose control of his Geppo technique and collapse down towards the ocean below.

OOOOOOO

Through something that Zoro was all-too prepared to call witchcraft, Nami had somehow used her weather senses to figure out where the fight was going on as the ice continued to grow out in every direction, soon eclipsing everything on the island. Everything, even the house that Tonjit had stayed in. He and his horse had been ushered into the kitchen for now.

She was too busy trying to control the ship as the weather and currents changed around them in reaction to the sudden growth of a glacier and the below-freezing temperatures that came with it appearing in the middle of a summer zone. Winds lashed the ship, the force of them trying to push the Resolve away, as the tides tried to draw them in, changing frequency and power from one second to the next.

Nami and the rest of the crew stared as the iceberg, which had grown as large as any mountain any of them had seen, suddenly shattered from top to bottom. Ice sloughed off into the water, creating huge waves. This continued, with Nami forced to ask Chopper for help at the wheel, as she shouted out orders to the others, turning them into the waves as they came, then using the wind to shift further away from the island, but still within sight of it.

Then, from above, Sanji shouted, "I see them! They're still up... wait, Luffy's coming this way!"

Zoro scowled, racing to the side of the ship currently nearest the icy island. "What's going on? I can't tell, Aho-cook!"

"...Luffy's running..." Sanji practically breathed. "Aokiji looks hurt, but Luffy looks like he's about to collapse. I can't see much injury....FUCK!" Sanji grimaced, having just watched his captain's foot get crushed like a tube of tomato paste through his spyglass.

"Damn," Laki whispered, watching the same thing from where she was using her skates to bounce around the mainmast as she saw Luffy's foot caught by the ice and then be bent in an unnatural angle. But as the two of them watched, wide-eyed, Luffy righted himself and then somehow began to use his foot once more, continuing to retreat out to sea.

"Chopper, keep on this course!" Nami barked, leaving her place by the tiller. "Laki, get down here!"

With Laki's help, Nami activated the various air dials underneath the Resolve's waterline, pushing the ship forward, but Zoro shouted, "Shit, the water, the ice is coming up quick underneath the water!"

Nami left Laki and raced to the bow, leaping up onto it so much Zoro grabbed her shoulder for fear she would have gone over. But she didn't, balancing there and staring down into the ocean, hissing in anger. The ice had been building up and growing out from the edge of the island underneath the waterline.

Glancing up at Luffy and estimating how fast he was dropping, Nami shook her head. "He's never going to make it out to us."

"Go," Zoro ordered. "We'll get the ship turned broadside and heading out to the open sea, but you have to go get our captain."

Nodding, Nami raced back to the center of the main deck, grabbing the waver, which she had placed there earlier that day. Rushing forward, Nami leaped over the side, hopping in the waver and igniting its Jet Dial as she hit the water. Sanji also leaped down after her. For a moment, as his hands went around her waist, his eyes turned to hearts, but the look faded as Nami pushed the Waver forward as fast as possible.

Once more, Nami's insane level of control and ability to read the ocean and weather came into play, and she raced forward just as Luffy crashed into the water. "Damn it!"

"I've got him, Nami-chwan!" Sanji disengaged from Nami and leaped into the water, swimming down towards where a flash of red hair could be seen, sinking quickly, having crashed through the edge of the still-expanding ice below the water. Grabbing the redhead around the chest, Sanji kicked hard for the surface, shivering at the chill in the water before

tossing Luffy up onto the Waver. He followed her up quickly and then began to pound on Luffy's back, forcing out the seawater the girl had drunk.

As the cook did so, Luffy gasped, shooting out water, and for a moment, smirked weakly at her two companions. She looked at Nami in particular, winking even as her entire body started to shut down once more from exhaustion. "Heh, I guess this means this was your time to save me?"

"Yeah, I guess it was," Nami laughed weakly, then pulled the now-unconscious Luffy against her, shaking her head as she started to steer them back to the Resolve.

There, they found the others waiting to help haul the redhead aboard, where Chopper took control of Luffy, bundling her inside. "Right, let's get going. I want to put as much space between us and that monster as possible!" Nami shouted as she moved back to the wheel. "We're heading on to the next island as fast as we..."

"Uh, um, wh, what about us?" Tonjit interrupted, holding up a hand as he stood by his horse, both looking as hangdog as they possibly could. Tonjit even added a quaver to his voice.

'Ahh...' Nami sweatdropped, then sighed, a scowl forming on her lips. "Fine! First, we drop these two off on another bit of this island, then we follow the Log Pose. That shouldn't be too hard now that I've got a feel for the seas around here, and we stay within the summer zone. Unless Aokiji comes after us. If that happens, be grateful that I don't toss you over the side as dead weight!"

"Scary!!!" Chopper, Tonjit, and even Shelly shouted.

Nami snorted, then raced to the wheel once more while behind her, Sanji joined Zoro in staring back towards Aokiji. Luckily it looked as if Aokiji wasn't coming after them, and both fighters breathed a sigh of relief as he instead moved towards the ship the marines had commandeered.

OOOOOOO

On the nearby ship which her crew had taken to calling The Last Step Home, Hina had watched as much of the battle as she could see from her position in the crow's nest, her heart pounding for some reason. A reason that she tried very to not think about. As Aokiji came out of the air towards them, Hina saluted, watching as he bounced off the topmast and down to the ship's main deck, following him quickly. "Sir, are you okay? D, did the pirates start a fight? I'll admit that I can very easily see Luffy taunting you in some fashion, although I didn't think he would at this point. Hina concerned."

"Mah, mah, nothing like that. He was more than willing to go his own way. I was the one who wanted to start this battle." Aokiji looked over at the massive iceberg his powers had

created, shaking his head ruefully, most of his normal lazy air in stark abeyance at present. "I didn't expect the youngster to fight so well, even after he defeated Crocodile and Doberman. His ability to figure out some way to negate my freezing powers was... worrisome." *To say nothing of that weird attack he nearly hit me with. That was dangerous, very dangerous.*

Nodding slowly while wondering what the heck the admiral was talking about, Hina stood at attention, heels clacking together on the deck. "Your orders, Sir? Do you want us to go after them?"

Holding his ribs, Aokiji looked at her in some surprise, one eyebrow rising. "Would you really recommend it?"

Wondering if this was some kind of trap, Hina paused for a moment, then decided that was not in keeping with Aokiji's personality. So instead, she simply replied as honestly as she could without giving away her own personal feelings on the matter. "I wouldn't recommend it, admiral. Our navigator died during the Knock Up Stream instant incident. And their navigator is dangerous in any kind of ocean combat. She is one of the few navigators I've ever heard of, who could even try to predict the weather of the Grand Line, and she was right most of the time I was aboard the Resolve."

Indeed, even in that, Hina was understating things. Nami had been right one hundred percent of the time when she had predicted the weather. That was something even the best navigators among the Marines couldn't boast.

"Hmmm, I didn't know that. Interesting. Still, no, we're not going to go after the Straw Hats. That would be stupid in the extreme. I'm done here. Let's head home."

"Yes, sir!" Hina saluted smartly once more, letting none of her relief show. Soon the marine's vessel started to pull away from the island.

OOOOOOO

Once more, Luffy woke up hurting all over and flat on his back in a bed without any ki to speak of. But this time, Luffy wasn't nearly as surprised about waking up. Nor was he as happy about the experience, although he did note someone had been nice enough to change him back to his male body. Thinking about it, Luffy knew he had pushed his abilities to the utmost, pulled out all the stops. *Heck, I even used the Seastone jutte, the sealed techniques, everything. And Aokiji still beat me. Beat me like a drum. I might've been able to cost him more if he'd come out after me, but he still would've won. Damn, is the difference between us so high? That makes eating the Goro Goro no Mi look like a necessity instead of just a good idea.*

I'll still wait a bit, though. Only when I'm well enough to start training with it right away. Unless Nami, Laki or one of the others wants it, of course. For now, though, my nose is itching something fierce!

He shook his head slightly and began to stir, grateful that at least this time, his body was already reacting to his demands to move. That had been really annoying the last time. With some relief, Luffy reached up to rub at his nose, only now looking around him.

To one side of Luffy's head, Chopper was asleep, having curled up on the same pillow that Luffy's head was currently on. Robin sat in a chair next to the bed, a novel open on her lap, but judging from where she was in it, she hadn't made much progress. Now she was staring at him, so many thoughts going through her head that even with Robin's preternatural self-control, Luffy could see them building behind her eyes.

But instead of addressing any of the emotions that she was feeling, Robin gestured with one hand, and another hand appeared on the pillow, first poking Luffy in the cheek and then poking Chopper awake. "Our captain has revived once more, doctor," she intoned simply.

Chopper blinked, stirring, then hopped off the bed, transforming into his human form. Grabbing up a tool, he began to examine Luffy's foot, shaking his head in mock disgust. "How do you do it?! I swear that ki healing of yours is cheating."

"Heh, I'da thought you'd have been used to it by now. Or were ya looking forward to trying me out for a peg leg?"

"Don't even joke, Baka!" Chopper shouted, his large hand covering Luffy's face and pushing him further into the pillow in annoyance. "You'd look freaking ridiculous like that anyway."

"How long was I out?" Luffy asked.

"Two days this time. You weren't nearly as horribly wounded as before, but your ki was apparently badly drained," Chopper chuckled, looking up at Luffy and shaking his head. "Although frankly, the huge payment that your ki ability demands is the only thing that is stopping me from calling you some kind of dark magic-user or living zombie."

Luffy chuckled at him, then looked over at the silent Robin for a second before turning back to Chopper. "Hey Chopper, don't tell the others I'm awake right away, okay? Robin and I need to talk."

Looking between the two humans and understanding that there was something more going on than he could see between the couple, Chopper nodded, shifting back to his normal body. *Ugh, as if I care about human mating habits.* "I'll leave you alone for now, so long as you promise not to leave that bed. Whatever your ki can do for healing you, your body's reserves are so utterly exhausted it more resembles someone who's been on a starvation diet for years than a normal person."

"I promise," Luffy answered dutifully.

"Thank you, Doctor-kun," Robin answered, sending him a smile, and with a final nod, Chopper exited the room quickly.

As soon as the door closed behind the little doctor, Robin began, her voice cold, analytical. "You see now what kind of threat I am to your crew Luffy?" Robin began. "Aokiji will come after us again. I'm a threat, a threat that brings down enemies on you that you are unprepared to face."

Hearing that, Luffy realized with a start that Robin was already trying to distance herself from him. That thought made Luffy's heart pound in his chest in a wholly unpleasant way, as angry bears started to fight it out in his stomach. *But even so, Robin's still here, watching as I recover*, Luffy thought, an idea that made the pain in his chest ease. *Fighting herself, she's fighting herself.*

With that knowledge, Luffy replied with a simple shrug, still having trouble moving his body much. "At this time, maybe. Eventually, I will be on their level. Hell, I know I broke at least a few of Aokiji's ribs and also knocked out a tooth or four. If I'd been able to hit him in the temple rather than the jaw, I might have been able to finish it then and there."

"Do you think that matters? Regardless of my personal feelings towards the man, Aokiji is the least combative of the three admirals. Could you have performed as well against one of the other admirals?" Robin shot back. "Magma, or Light?" She waited while Luffy just looked at her for a moment before going on. "You are a fool if you think you could have fought either of them as well as you did Aokiji, who is known to be somewhat lazy and rarely if ever fights to his full ability. To say nothing of the forces they can bring in the guns of the galleons, the fire, and flame the, they..."

Shuddering, Robin stood up abruptly, turning away from the bed as once more the horror of the Buster Call rose up in her mind, overcoming her current thoughts. "This was a mistake. Getting involved with you, getting involved with your crew, I have brought too much danger your way. I've told you this many times. On the next island, I will leave you. I, I have become tired of this life, of the whole world being my enemy. I will turn myself into the marines, and they will..."

She started staring down at where Luffy's grip had clamped over her wrist before she could take a step away from her chair. Robin turned back to see Luffy sitting upright, and having reached over towards her, so quickly she hadn't even heard the rustle from the blanket.

Now he pulled her back towards the bed before she could try to twist away. Robin gasped as she slammed into his chest, and Luffy fell back, one arm going around her in a loose hug, his breath coming labored given the moment of exertion. Looking at him, Robin felt she could probably have broken away, but not without some effort despite how weakened Luffy was.

"You think that by running off, you'd make us safer?" Luffy hissed into her hair before reaching up with the hand that had previously grasped Robin's wrist, turning her head just enough to lock eyes with Robin. "Maybe in the short run, but in the long run? No. Remember my dream, remember that eventually, those admirals will come after me in earnest for my own sake! I'm already on the road to making the World Government and anyone connected to it my enemy!" Luffy held Robin's eyes until she nodded imperceptibly.

When she did, he lifted a finger off her back, gesturing unseen to the door. "Besides, you go out there and ask any of our crew. Nami, Makino, Zoro, Laki, Sanji, Chopper! Ask any of them whether or not they would sacrifice someone else to be safe. Let alone a fellow crew member! We're pirates. Safe doesn't enter into it."

"There is a difference between laughing in the face of danger and laughing in the face of the apocalypse," Robin shot back. "You cannot possibly face the enemies my presence will..."

"Not even with the Goro Goro no Mi?" Luffy hissed, now getting a bit angry.

At that, Robin hesitated. She had indeed forgotten the fruit they had been able to recover from Enel's death. But despite that, to Luffy, it still looked almost like Robin was ready to bolt, her eyes seeing both Luffy and something else, something beyond him. *Shit, what the hell did the marines, or that bastard Aokiji more like, do to make you so afraid, Robin? That look reminds me of the ones I saw in the survivors of the Grey Terminal fire.*

When he spoke, his tone had softened, even as his grip around Robin tightened, Luffy pushing his body to respond, uncaring of the cost of his demands on it. "I've seen the real Robin. The one who laughs, the one who enjoys teaching Chopper how to enjoy fantasy books or likes to tease Sanji or me. The one whose eyes come alive when you mention history, or those ruins back on Skypiea. Those aren't the eyes of someone who's really given up."

From this close, Luffy's breath wafted over Robin's lips, and a part of Robin's mind had enough wherewithal to thank Chopper for having brushed his teeth over the past few days. But the majority of Robin's mind was consumed by the intensity in Luffy's gaze, unable to turn away as if his eyes had mesmerized her, while Luffy pulled Robin tighter to him.

"So answer me this: do you want to die? Or do you want to live! Because if you keep on running all your life, that's not living, that's just waiting to die. If you give yourself up, that's just letting them win. You win by staying alive, by enjoying the journey and being with us. Live with me, live with us, train with us! Get stronger, and then all of us can achieve our dreams together. We'll show the world that it's not a crime to dream. It's not a crime to know what others don't know. And it is not, **ever**, a fucking crime to simply exist!"

Robin didn't know when in that speech, she began to cry, but when Luffy fell silent, she felt the tears trickled down her cheeks until they began to soak the shirt that Luffy had been put into by Zoro for the day. "I, I..."

"Say it, Robin," Luffy requested, his voice stern yet also warm, as his arms tightened around her. "Say it, love."

"I want to live!" Robin whispered as she began to feel some of the chill within, some of the hardness and fear instilled in her by the Buster Call fading. It was still there in the back of her mind, but in the face of Luffy's sheer warmth, his determination and will, it couldn't remain in the forefront of her mind. Luffy was here now, and in her mind, she saw his shadow, standing between Robin and the memory of that danger, willing to protect her, willing to stand with her even against that threat.

Luffy's own words confirmed this. "Whatever happens, whatever we face, whatever comes our way, we face it together. You and me, you and this crew, that's what being a crew really means."

At that point, Robin had gone through such an emotional roller coaster she couldn't reply verbally. But that didn't mean she was without recourse, and she leaned up, kissing him hard on the lips. Quickly, Robin's tongue invaded his mouth, where it met Luffy's. For a few moments, Robin was doing all the work, Luffy's normally quick response to such being impacted by his exhaustion, and possibly the amount of effort he'd put into pulling Robin down onto the bed. Then he finally began to respond, and Robin's lips curled slightly into a smile as their tongues began to duel.

With that, Robin slowly began to move her waist against his, feeling his reaction growing despite how tired he was. *And it doesn't look as if the sudden shift in his blood flow has caused him to collapse again. Good. Now that I have decided to live, Luffy, you better believe we will be pushing this relationship of ours to the next level!*

Alas for Robin's libido, the rest of the crew forced their way in, their shouts resounding in the air, one voice over another.

"Luffy!"

"You're awake, huh, Luffy?"

"Chopper says you're going to..."

After a few seconds, everyone's voice drifted off as they stared at the sight of Robin laying out on top of Luffy, practically humping him by this point, for all they were still clothed, as the two of them made out. Then Sanji's eyes burst into flames as he roared, "What the hell do you think you're doing, you bastard Pigtail!"

He launched himself forward in a kick, his eyes blazing, but Zoro stepped in quickly. Before Sanji could do more than leap into the air, his course was diverted by a swing of Wado Ichimonji. "Oy, that's enough of that Shit Cook!"

Reluctantly pulling away from Luffy, Robin rolled to the side, laying on the bed next to her man, curling up next to him almost like a giant cat as she crossed her arms across her chest. Multiple hands rose from the ground and the wall behind Sanji, reaching out one over another to grab him, pulling him back against the wall.

"No, say it isn't so, Robin-chwan!" Sanji began to weep, not even trying to fight her arms as they bound him, the flames in his eyes snuffed out as his entire body seemed to droop, his face a mask of horror.

Staring at the cook, Robin slowly shook her head then looked back at Luffy, who simply smiled at her, leaning further back in the bed while his arm moving around her shoulders, holding her close as one arm gently began to stroke up and down her side including a bit of side boob away from the view of the others. It wasn't possessive or lustful, that touch, simply loving and appreciative, but even so, it put a faint flush on her face.

Still, this wasn't the moment for that, and she shook her head slightly, causing Luffy to move his hand down to the outside of her hip instead. With that seen to, Robin leaned her head against Luffy's shoulder and turned back to Sanji. "Well, this wasn't how I wanted it to come out, but I suppose it will do. Yes, Cook-san, Luffy and I are in a relationship. We have been for a few weeks, but we did not want the Marines to discover it, so we were forced to hide it from everyone while they were around. I would apologize, but considering your reaction to seeing us just now, I think our concerns about the crew's ability to keep it secret were justified."

Actually, that was only half the reason why. *Or perhaps*, Robin thought ruefully, *something like thirty-three percent considering my own issue*. Still, Robin felt this little white lie could be forgiven at the moment. *Best not to point out it was Sanji's reaction we really didn't want to deal with while they were around.*

Actually, while Robin was somewhat annoyed by the interruption, Luffy was sort of relieved. *With as tired as I am, I doubt I'd be able to, um, do anything really beyond getting it up. And I refuse to let Robin do all the work, no matter how many freaking hands she can bring to the task.*

Laki and Makino clapped, while Nami just nodded, still feeling a bit jealous, but not nearly as much as she had during or right after her little moment of stupidity up in Skypiea. *Huh, is this a sign of my growing maturity, or the fact my crush on Luffy is fading?*

A moment later, Luffy looked at her and gave her a thumbs up with the hand that wasn't currently resting on Robin's hip. He mouthed the words 'thank you' to Nami, and the orange-haired girl could feel her last bit of jealousy disappearing. Even with his relationship with Robin in the open now, his interaction with the rest of the crew wasn't going to change, not even with Nami.

Since Makino, Chopper and Zoro had already known about the relationship thanks to it coming out before they met Tonjit, back on Long Ring Long Land Island, they all took this 'revelation' in stride. But as usual, Zoro proved that he had been behind the door when the tact had been handed out. "Bah! You and maybe Laki were the only ones who didn't know Love Cook. They came out in the open with us before that embarrassment with the Foxy cretins. Hell, I even felt something was going on before that."

"Ehhhh!!?" Sanji bawled, shaking his head and now actually weeping. "Wait, wait, you two have not only been together, but the crap swordsman saw it coming?!" Sanji gasped, shaking his head. How, how could I have...Wait, that night, the party! You two were you, were..." the waterworks got worse at that point, while Luffy flushed a bit, remembering that night. "Say it isn't so, Robin-chwan!"

Robin smiled beautifully, while Luffy simply shook his head, the flush on his face disappearing. "You of all people should know that a gentleman doesn't kiss and tell, Sanji."

Sanji snorted, but the joke actually helped him regain some of his equilibrium, and he waved his one free hand airily. "You talked about my night with Conis. I didn't see any hint of that kind of attitude then."

"Hah, I just mentioned it. I didn't ask for any details or anything," Luffy retorted. The two men looked at one another, and Sanji finally shook, smirked, nodding his head and conceding the point before becoming serious, pointing his cigarette at his captain. "You hurt her, I hurt you, got it! Anyone who hurts the lovely ladies of this crew will answer to me, whatever the circumstances."

"Heh, got it. And if I do, I might even let ya wail on me for a bit, 'cause I'd figure I would have earned it."

Chopper shook his head, moving forward and leaping up onto the bed. "Well, if all of this human-style nonsense is done, can I finish my examination, or are you two going to continue your mating ritual in front of the rest of us?"

Robin surprised herself by blushing and shook her head quickly. "You have no need of any concerns on that score." Even though she wasn't as open about her body as Nami habitually was, Robin wasn't exactly prudish, but there was something very disturbing about the idea of even kissing in front of Chopper. In many ways, he was very much a young child, while in other ways, a fully grown adult.

"Robin's right, Chopper. Human mating rituals happen in private most of the time Chopper, you don't have anything to fear on that score," Luffy agreed. "In fact, if any of you are uncomfortable with us being affectionate at all in front of you, speak up. I don't want this to mess with our crew dynamics."

“Does that include me?!” Sanji waved his hand wildly.

While the others guffawed and Robin firmly informed the flirtatious cook that no, it did not, Chopper began to examine Luffy, starting from the ruined foot that he had been forced to heal completely up with his ki healing, not because it wasn't healed, but because he was still astonished at how good ki healing worked. Luffy didn't even have any scars to add to those he had taken in the fight with Enel. *I guess this fight wasn't as... raw, maybe, as that one. Or maybe Luffy just knew that he wouldn't win faster, and he also knew he could retreat?* It always surprised him how much Luffy, for all his normal fun and almost laid back air, could strategize like that in a battle.

Chopper was about to start questioning Luffy on how ki felt, how he controlled it and how it worked. But then Luffy's stomach roared. It sounded like a pride of lions had suddenly teleported into the room. It was so loud that Chopper squeaked in horror leaping from a standing start more than two yards to land on Zoro's face, clinging to it with all four hoofs as he looked around wildly. “Gah, lions! Lions, wh, where!?”

This caused everyone to burst out into laughter, even the still annoyed Sanji. He shook his head, took his cigarette out of his mouth, and tapped it lightly to get rid of the ash before addressing Luffy. “Well then, I suppose I should go back to my first question. What do you want to eat, you shitty captain?”

Luffy blinked. "Is this a trick question? Everything!"

Again laughter abounded around the room, and Sanji smirked, bowed, and left to head up to the kitchen area.

OOOOOOO

It had taken the Marines only about two weeks to get to the nearest Marine base and then from there, thanks to Aokiji's Eternal Pose and being able to use the Calm Belt, another four days to get to Marineford. Once there, all of them have been sequestered and questioned for another few hours by their superior officers about what had occurred since the last time Hina had been in communication with her superiors. The next day, Hina found herself in front of what amounted to a tribunal, which Hina knew could easily turn into a court-martial if those involved wanted it to become such. No matter the reasoning, working with pirates was a severe issue.

Thankfully for her, Staff Officer Tsuru was the one in charge of all such mission reviews. Sitting with her were Aokiji, Akainu and Sengoku, who represented a large portion of the marine high command.

Vice-Admiral Garp was not there. Indeed, he had been sent away from Marine Headquarters the moment news of Hina and Aokiji's return reached Sengoku. That had been a

hard sell for Sengoku but one that had been necessary. Straw Hat Luffy had risen in priority now from a person of interest to a real danger to the world peace the marines were sworn to defend. So, Sengoku had sent Garp to assess the damage done to one of their fleets in the New World. It had tried to get between Shanks and a meeting he had somehow set up with Whitebeard and had fared... poorly in the exchange.

Tsuru had always been something of a mentor to Hina. But there was nothing in her manner now to suggest that as she questioned Hina closely covering everything from when Hina had last communicated to the confrontation with the rogue logia user, Enel.

Hina answered the questions honestly and as completely as she could. This did not, in point of fact, paint her in a very good light at first.

"Let me get this straight. This Monkey D. Luffy first killed Crocodile in single combat after he and Fire Fist Ace defeated you and Smoker-kun. The Straw Hat Pirate then broke your cordon, defeated Smoker, you and your combined crews, along with Doberman. And then you, in your infinite wisdom, decide to follow them!?" Tsuru barked. "Girl, I know I taught you better than that!"

Gulping, Hina stuttered at first, then got herself under control. "Hina, er, I did not believe I could defeat the pirates in a straight battle. Rather, I felt that it was possible to trail them, then attack from range. The captain and the other two Geppo users could be targeted at range if need be, and the ship damaged at that range as well. I had trust that our marine gunners and my galleon's cannons could damage the Resolve enough that the pirates would be forced to go to ground and then could be overwhelmed more easily."

"Hmm... well, that makes some sense, I suppose, though I think you made this decision more from your heart than your head." Tsuru snorted. "And you paid for it, didn't you?" she glared at the younger woman, but after a moment, her look softened. "Continue."

"Y, yes ma'am," Hina answered, on the back foot already. Despite that, she continued, moving from meeting with Captain Rapanui and then on to the battle between the pirates, which she had attempted to take advantage of. "Unfortunately, that was a mistake because of a local sea-feature called the Knock Up Stream. Hina shamed."

When they got to the part about how she had been knocked unconscious during the trip up to the White Sea, Akainu began to growl, portions of his body turning into magma as he glared at her. When it came to the point where she had agreed to a truce to save the remnants of her crew, he finally exploded. "You worked with pirates!?" he shouted. "How dare you stand before us and declare that! And you call yourself a marine?"

"Give over Akainu. We already knew that from her report. I understand you have a certain hotheaded image to uphold, but her original agreement with the Straw Hats isn't the issue here. Marines have been forced into similar situations before, and indeed, most of those

situations have ended far worse than this one. Especially for female marines.” Tsuru glared the young man into submission before tapping the report in front of her. “No, what we want to know about is the later agreement to join with Garp’s grandson and deal with this Goro Goro no Mi user.”

“It was the lesser of two evils at the time,” Hina winced. “While Luffy’s admittedly incredible combat skill was a concern, I felt that it was less of one than a tyrant with the power of the lightning fruit. A fruit that can boast of being nearly invincible to a level few others can.”

“Your written report says that this proved to be a good idea as well,” Sengoku said thoughtfully, looking down at the paper. “This Enel, he truly intended to kill everyone in Skypiea? Remove them from God’s domain it says here?”

“Yes, Sir. That is a direct quote. Enel was insane. He attempted to convince several survivors of the battles between the Shandians and his followers to join him. Hell Cook Sanji, me and Devil Child Nico Robin all refused, despite the fact he had already shown he was almost entirely immune to our abilities. After the battle, I even heard how he had been able to restart his heart after taking a blast from what is called an Impact Dial while being in contact with Seastone.”

Even Akainu subsided at that, although he was still scowling angrily at Hina. Yet when he spoke, it was clear that for all his anger at her, Akainu had read Hina’s report. “You described your own fight against his priests. Were they truly a religious order?”

“Yes, Sir. Talking to the locals afterward, I discovered that the title of ‘Kami’ had simply been an organizational term before this, a signal that this individual had taken on the responsibility of defending the island. But Enel, who apparently came from another island, I detailed that information in my account near the end under the second-hand information section as I didn’t discover where precisely, he took it to an extreme. He truly believed he was God, and so did his followers. By the time we arrived, nearly everyone else on the island come to believe it, except for the Shandians. Hina disgusted.”

“Why?” Sengoku asked bluntly. “While movement between the White Sea and the Blue Sea is not regular or anything close, they should still have known about Devil Fruits.”

“Most of the Skypieans did not, Sir. Further, Enel’s Mantra was incredible. That is the term they had for Kenbunshoku, and his radius was incredible.”

“Probably because of the Goro Goro no Mi. I can think of a few ways lightning could be used to heighten a native Kenbunshoku ability,” Tsuru murmured. “Still, this dial, what can you tell us about them. We’ve had reports about them before, but...”

“You can speak to Hina about that later, Tsuru. But a logia-type user was a danger that we need to know about. Detail his abilities and skills,” Sengoku ordered. “We have far too little

knowledge of the Goro Goro no Mi on file. The last known user lived around a hundred years ago and only used it in one battle that we have any records of.”

“And are you certain he is dead?” Akainu added fiercely.

“I saw his corpse afterward, yes he is very dead. Luffy tore out his heart with Busoshoku covered fingers.” Hina shook her head slightly. “I would have thought they had killed one another frankly, as I saw Luffy right after the battle too. I’ve never seen someone so battered.”

“We’ll get to that soon, but the abilities of the Goro Goro no Mi first,” Sengoku declared firmly.

Hina nodded and began to describe the abilities she had personally seen, including the last attack, the Raigo, which had eventually wiped out Skypiea. At that point, she described how she had helped Luffy basically make himself into a living lightning rod to draw off the attack's deadly power to save the Skypieans.

That actually caused everyone bar Akainu to smile, but the magma user scowled. “Then how the hell did Luffy win! There’s no way someone with already weakening Busoshoku could keep fighting after that.”

“No, don’t jump to the end like that. We need an idea of Luffy’s abilities, so start from the beginning,” Tsuru ordered.

“I am afraid I can’t say I saw most of the fight,” Hina answered, prevaricating slightly. “I saw most of Enel’s attacks as they passed beyond the edge of the flying ship, but the battle went from on top of the ARC Maxim and then up at the top of Giant Jack. All I can say for certain is that Luffy showed a mastery of Rokushiki style that I have seen rarely equaled. I saw him use Geppo, Soru, Kami-E, Tekkai, and Luffy even admitted that he knew Shigan but preferred not to use it. Whatever else he is, Monkey D. Luffy is not someone willing to kill at the drop of a hat.”

The admirals in front of Hina ignored that bit of lukewarm support for Luffy, and Sengoku leaned back, kneading his nose. Dammit, Garp! Those are supposed to be Marine only techniques!”

“Yes, you should remonstrate most harshly with them,” Akainu growled, shaking his head. “Teaching those techniques to someone who became a pirate? If it was anyone but Garp, the hero who took down the Pirate King, I would call that treason! Almost as treasonous as you working with these damn pirates!” he went on, ignoring the current discussion to go back to that point like a dog with a bone as he leveled a glare at Hina.

"Now, now," Aokiji said with a shake of his head. "We've already talked about that. If Hina hadn't worked with the Straw Hats, a lot of the Skypieans would have died and her crew too."

"Then she should have died!" Akainu roared, slamming one hand down on the desk in front of them, while Sengoku and Tsuru stared at him in distaste. "Better that than the dishonor of owing your life to a pirate!"

"And if she had, the Goro Goro fruit would still be in the hands of this Enel fellow. That kind of power in a mad man's hands is something no one wants to say."

For a moment, that argument got home to Akainu, and he sighed, nodding slowly in manifest reluctance before he turned back to Hina. "Do you have any idea what happened to the fruit after Enel died? The devil fruit power usually goes into the nearest similar type of fruit randomly. If we can get our hands on that, even I would be willing to pardon you for the crime of joining hands with pirates."

But even with the idea of a pardon from her most angry questioner in front of her, Hina had to shake her head. "I'm afraid not, Sir. I had all of my remaining able-bodied Marines, all eight of them," she growled out, shaking her head in sadness before going on more purposefully. "I had them all look around the island afterward while we were recuperating in the guise of helping Shandians gather their wounded and dead. But none of them reported seeing anything."

"In that case, we'll have to set that aside for now, darn it. At least we know the pirates don't have it either. Let's get back to the problem that is still among the living," Sengoku ordered. "You and Aokiji here have given us quite a lot of valuable information about this Luffy fellow. His various extremely strange techniques are concerning, but did you ever see this ability to disappear he used on Aokiji?"

"Yes, Sir. It was how Luffy caught up to Enel in the first place. He nearly took the so-called Kami out right then, but due to the nature of the of his Devil Fruit, Enel was somehow able to sense Luffy when he came to close even under that stealth technique." Hina then shrugged. "As to the mechanics of it, I have no idea. Hina clueless."

"But you like Aokiji saw Luffy healing himself somehow?"

Hina hesitated no less than a fraction of a second. She was a Marine, she had sworn the oath, and she and Luffy had discussed this. So long as she and her men kept his primary secret, that of his female form, her debt to Luffy, her part of their agreement, was paid. *But what price would I put on friendship?* She thought before sternly locking the thought away in her mind. *This is not the time to admit to anyone, even myself, that I think of Luffy as a possible friend.*

"Yes, during the battle, when he was knocked off the Ark Maxim, he used this technique to heal himself. I even heard what he called it, a kind of Haki technique. Where he came up with it, or even now, I cannot say."

"You don't know anything, then?" Akainu growled.

"Nothing specific, Sir, only what I observed in combat. Luffy was willing to help us. He was even somewhat friendly, willing to share his crew's supplies and help us back down to the Grand Line. But he didn't share much of his own background or training."

"Then what did you observe? And you too, Aokiji. I know you hate writing up reports, so let's just save time and have you described your fight with Garp's grandson now," Sengoku ordered, looking over at Aokiji, who still wore wraps around his chest to help his broken ribs.

The others all questioned Hina and Aokiji closely. Hina detailed nearly everything she had seen from Luffy, which amounted to much the same tricks he had used in his battle with Aokiji. "Although this time, he didn't forget that he had Smoker's sword-breaker. Hina amused."

For his part, beyond the colors of the blue gold energy that Aokiji had seen Luffy used to repair his foot, the ice user hadn't seen anything else of Luffy's healing ability, although he had seen him use it as an attack as well. That was very strange, highly unusual, and Tsuru was tasked by Sengoku to look through the archives for anything similar. "Get in touch with the World Government as well. I'll authorize your access to their archives. If Luffy can teach others how to use that technique, much like you can the Rokushiki, his crew could become one of the most dangerous in the world in time."

Before Akainu could pounce on that, Sengoku waved him to silence, turning to Hina, looking down at her report, then up at her. "Is there anything you wish to add that wasn't in this report?"

Hina hesitated again for just a second. But she clung to one thought above all others. *I am a Marine, and I swore the oath.* "Several things, sir. First, Luffy hates the World Government," the pink-haired woman began bluntly. "And he hates slavery worse."

"It's not slavery," Akainu growled. "It is human resource redistribution, remember that. We don't want you to slip up like that in front of the public. Regardless of personal beliefs, our task as Marines has never been to write the laws, only to enforce them. The World Government and the dragons, they are the law."

"I was merely saying what Luffy thinks, sir," Hina said, and for the first time, allowed herself to glare back at her superior. "Although I personally do not find any easier to sleep at night if I simply change the terminology of such atrocities."

Akainu seemed to breathe in for a diatribe, but once again, Aokiji stepped in, looking at Hina. "He told you about this, I take it?"

"When we were discussing the details of our peace agreement, yes. Luffy will never agree to work with the World Government. So if you were thinking of perhaps reaching out to him and asking him to become a warlord, I would argue against it. At best, he would ignore it. At worst, he might take it as an insult."

"We wouldn't be able to do that anyway, as the position has since been filled, but could we lead them into a trap with that kind of thing? An insult of some kind?" Akainu asked, with Tsuru nodding alongside them. Even Sengoku looked thoughtful.

But Hina shook her head. "No, or at least not through insults like that or anything similar. Luffy will always put his crew before his own personal ire. Frankly, he'd probably just laugh and insult us all in some fashion. And that was another thing Luffy was incredibly good at..." she paused. "How to describe it? Call it the mental side of things. His ability to get into his enemy's head is phenomenal, and once he does, he knows your style and how to make you angry enough to make mistakes."

"I agree, at least with the first part," Aokiji added. "He didn't try to make me angry, but he was able to start anticipating my moves almost like he was learning how to use Kenbunshoku mid-battle. He is far more intelligent than a pirate of his age could be and simply far more skilled."

"I think it would be in the best interest of the Marines if we figured out where his strange abilities came from if at all possible," Tsuru agreed. "Above and beyond me searching our archives."

"Agreed. We'll send some agents into East Blue to look around and then follow their route through the Grand Line. As far as we know, Luffy never left the ocean after Garp dropped them off there on Dawn Island, so the answers must be there somewhere."

The Tsuru looked thoughtful, tapping one finger on another, frowning. But she shook her head, unwilling to give the odd thoughts her extremely analytical mind had just thought up.

"Anything else?"

Hina steeled herself, then to the plunge. "One aspect of the fight against Enel that I did not witness, but rather felt, was something I did not want to put into that report for fear of causing a panic among anyone below admiral-class who read it. Monkey D. Luffy...Luffy has the Haoshoku."

For a moment, there was silence. Then Sengoku leaned forward, scowling angrily. The Haoshoku was a game-changer. You could count on the fingers of both hands the number of

people in the world who had it, and in the case of a pirate having it, that number included all Four Emperors and several other extremely dangerous, powerful pirates, like Silvers Rayleigh and his former captain Gol. D. Roger.

Oddly, the only marine who could use it was Sengoku himself. He had often wondered why and had decided that the Haoshoku seemed to go with a certain type of personality, the kind willing to, in as he put it in his own thoughts, look at the world and give it a big 'fuck you' middle finger and carry on. "If he can use Haoshoku, that might explain why he wasn't willing to die from the wounds he sustained against Enel. But how strong is he? Does he know how to use it?"

"He was able to use it to a certain extent, to throw Enel off his game, and I think it might've worked for a few seconds, but not long enough for him to finish the fight. However, it was extremely powerful, able to knock all of my surviving Marines, including my intent, unconscious even when we were nearly a mile below the Ark Maxim. Indeed, after the battle was over, I discovered that people out on sky island had also collapsed." She smirked slightly. "Ironically, that helps the evacuation, a letting other convincing other that there was indeed a threat from the holy land that they had to flee from. Hina ironic."

Sengoku chuckled somewhat wanly. *Damn it, Garp! Where did this monster you call a grandson come from?!* "That's amusing at least."

Akainu looked over at Aokiji glared angrily. "And this is the pirate you let go!? You should be ashamed to still wear that uniform."

Aokiji shrugged lightly, tapping his bandage covered chest and stomach. "Mah, I'm not wearing my full uniform at the moment anyway." Then he became serious once more. "That one attack he attempted to use on, which Hina apparently didn't see or just didn't understand, concerned me a hell of a lot. It made my Kenbunshoku practically scream in warning as long as I was in my human body. And if I had gone after him, the rest of his crew would've gotten involved. Which would've been both more dangerous and would've broken my word to Luffy to make it just a fight between us."

"Your words to a pirate! You're too damn soft!" Akainu growled.

At this point, Hina was idly wondering if that tone was the only one he could speak in. *He almost sounds more dog than a man. Amusing, considering one of his proteges is Doberman.*

"Enough," Sengoku growled, silencing both of them with a glare. Then he turned back to Hina, shaking his head. "Thank you, Hina, that will be all." He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment and then went on after exchanging a glance with Tsuru. "You will be praised publicly for dissipation in the defeat of an element user, but there will be a mark in your file, a mark against you in terms of how long it took you to get away from these pirates. It will be unofficial and will not count against your next review, but it is something that we will keep an eye on."

Hina nodded, then got to her feet as the man signaled the interview was over. She saluted them, gaining a salute in turn from all but Akainu, and turned, marching out of the room.

When the pink-haired woman went to open the door, Tsuru's voice called her back. "Hina, the news about Monkey D. Luffy having Haoshoku derailed us a bit, so before you go, you say he is dangerous mentally, but what do you think is his most dangerous ability? In your own opinion."

"His ability to adapt," Hina said instantly. "His ability to create tactics and strategies on the fly mid-battle, adapt to each opponent is such minutiae that it is frankly scary."

After she finished speaking, Hina waited for a second, then left, closing the door behind her. For a moment, she stared at the far wall, one fist smacking against her thigh. *Hina, sorry, Luffy. But I swore an oath. Yet never before has it been anywhere near as bitter to follow.* She stood there for a moment, fighting back the guilt and sadness at how she had just sold out her friend, before straightening her shoulders and moving off down the hallway.

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As the door closed behind Hina, Aokiji chuckled, leaning back and touching his jaw lightly. He'd already been fitted with a few new ones, but he had lost three in the fight with Luffy, knocked clear out of his mouth from a Busoshoku-infused blow. "Mah, I agree with Hina. Beyond his speed, beyond anything else, it was his ability to adapt to my abilities as the fight continued that really threw me off. That and that... 'Soul of Ice' technique. Which apparently Hina didn't see before."

He shook his head, shivering slightly, which caused Sengoku to snort. The idea of Aokiji of all people being cold simply hilarious to the man the world called 'the Buddha.'

"It was like he shut down his emotions, and with it his ability to feel pain, anger, cold, or anything else."

"Hmm, now that you point it out, it is strange that he didn't use such a mental technique against Enel. It might have helped him deal with his opponent's moves and perhaps affect Enel's Kenbunshoku. But surely Hina would've noticed in that brief interlude between round one and two if he was so unemotional," Tsuru murmured. *Is there some kind of drawback to it?*

"Oh, she would definitely have noticed." Again, Aokiji shivered at the memory. "That's not the kind of thing anyone could miss. I've been glared at by the best, and that look was quite scary."

"We shouldn't have mollycoddle Hina so much. She should have been reprimanded and knocked down a grade!"

"Again, what was she supposed to do? You can't just assume that everyone is going to be so willing to fall on their swords as you apparently want other people to be," Aokiji said acerbically, losing his temper for once. "Especially an officer who actually cares for her people, which your protégé Doberman apparently does not."

Akainu growled, in anger, but kept on doggedly, ignoring the last comment as immaterial. If Doberman had been able to kill this pirate for the expense of a few sailors, then that would have been a price well worth paying. "She did some good, I'll admit. And having this Enel fellow dead and the possibility that we might be able to discover the Goro Goro no Mi is a bonus. But, by Hina's and your own admission, this Luffy character is too dangerous to allow to continue to go free!"

He looked over at Tsuru and Sengoku, giving up Aokiji as a lost cause. "Hina should have discovered some means of sabotaging their ship. Indeed, she has not said anything about their ship in this report other than the name and that it was practically remade in Skypiea. There is no sign Hina attempted to snoop around, no mention of any secrets of the rest of the crew."

"Hmm... I will admit Hina concentrated nearly her entire report on Luffy, to the exclusion of the other pirates that make up that crew. All we know is that the swordsman wants to be the best in the world, the cook is a flirt, this green-haired woman has some connection to Shanks, of all people, and that the one we've since been calling 'unknown female pirate' really does have orange hair and is their navigator," Tsuru murmured.

"They took on a new gunner as well, a Shandian woman," Aokiji answered mildly. "Hina did mention that."

"That's not enough! In fact, I think she showed a disturbing amount of fixation on this Luffy character from the get-go."

"Enough," Sengoku interjected, shaking his head. "We've already decided on Hina's future. Her return and those of her survivors was a major boost in our men's morale, especially when accompanied by the story of their war against Enel and placed against the destruction of one of our New World fleets. You will not denigrate that or Hina. We can criticize some of her choices. You cannot criticize the means with which she survived."

"Agreed. Let's move this conversation on," Tsuru said, clapping her hands once. "What are we going to do about this Luffy fellow?"

"We cannot allow him and his crew to go free!" Akainu growled, pointing out what he thought was the most obvious thing in the world. "Gather our fleets, inundate Paradise near Long Ring Long Land Island. Find them, harry them, destroy them."

Sengoku slowly nodded. "I agree. It'll be a wrench, trying to convince Garp of the necessity, and if he finds out from other sources, he might become quite... recalcitrant." In other words, Garp might go on a rampage, but Sengoku was careful not to say so. The idea of the hero of the Marines suddenly turning on them was not a pleasant one. But whatever he might say about how disrespectful Luffy was, Sengoku knew the two of them had been close.

"I disagree," Aokiji said, and Tsuru added her own voice to this, taking over when the lazy admiral fell silent. "Luffy is not a threat."

Akainu began to look as if he would imitate a volcano and erupt for a moment, but the old woman glared him down. When she was certain he would listen, she shook her head. "For all his martial skills and hatred of the World Government, Luffy has yet to rampage, Luffy has yet to, in point of fact, do nearly anything that could be described as piratical. Beyond ransacking the palace of Alabasta anyway, and even then, his crew didn't hurt anyone."

And even that is strange, the marine's premier strategist and analyst thought to herself, shaking her head. The inquiry into what occurred there with Crocodile was still going on, but frankly, that investigation wasn't so much an investigation as a cover-up, trying to exonerate the rest of the World Government and Marines of what Crocodile had attempted to do. But the fact that Crocodile had been able to create an entire underground network of agents and a criminal organization that directly struck at a World Government member had to be hidden.

"No. Suppose we divert enough of our forces in Paradise to stop Monkey D. Luffy. In that case, we are opening the way for pirates who will pillage their way through Paradise unchecked. Especially with everything else going on. No, given Hina's report on his personality, even with Nico Robin among them, this Luffy fellow is not the type to become a threat to world peace. Certainly not as big a one as a few of the other rookies, especially that Eustass Kidd fellow."

"So what do you recommend instead, Tsuru?" Sengoku asked, looking over at her.

"Wait until I can research these odd abilities of his first. They may be something we can counter in some fashion. Beyond that, for now, I think we should issue a low-key do not engage order. Luffy has proven that he's not the kind to run from a fight, even if he won't start any. And frankly, given what we are planning in the near future, unless..." she paused, thinking then smiled thinly. "We don't have the manpower to spare right now. But there could be something else we could do... let me think about it for a few days. I want to check where certain allied elements are operating currently."

"I disagree. I disagree most strenuously. We haven't even announced we have Ace yet. Whitebeard has no idea we have one of his precious sons, even. Until we do, we have the manpower to..."

"We might be able to divert enough ships, perhaps. But again, not without letting other pirates in Paradise run wild, which would be a PR disaster that buzzard Big New Morgan would jump all over!" Tsuru barked. "I know, I'm the one who has written out our fleet deployment schedule for decades. Do not test me on this, boy!"

Scowling, Akainu proceeded to do just that, attempting to convince the others they did have the logistics to take Luffy out and then prepare for their war with Whitebeard. But Tsuru was adamant, and with her arguing against Akainu and Sengoku no longer taking part, Aokiji knew how this argument would go.

He slowly began to fall asleep only to wake up abruptly when Tsuru's cane cracked into his shoulder, causing them to grunt in pain, and she pointed at him sternly. "If you're going to sleep, go to your room! You still need to recover from your wounds after all."

"Agreed," Sengoku nodded. "You're on half-duty, and I want to make this clear, Aokiji, that means you are to stay here and heal. No more gallivanting off alone. Understood? You suffered a minor concussion in that fight, and such things take time to heal, even for someone like you."

Soon after Aokiji was sent off like a little boy to bed, the meeting eventually broke up.

But as they all returned to their own offices, Akainu was, oddly for someone who had just lost an argument, smiling. With Aokiji out of it, some of the projects that he had been overseeing, such as one in which he was working with the World Government that of all the admirals had been watching closely: the ongoing efforts of the CP-9 to investigate the whereabouts to the plans of the supreme weapon, Pluton. *And the Straw Hat crew's Log Pose may take them to Water 7, or perhaps they might even run into the sea train. And if so, I can acquisition enough high-level fighters to fight this crew without messing up Tsuru's precious schedule.*

Soon he was back in his office, using his Den Den Mushi to call a certain governmental toady. *But even toads have their uses.* "Director Spandam, this is Akainu. I have some new orders for you..."

When he got off the phone from that, admittedly loathsome worm, Akainu spent some time thinking, staring down at a map of the Grand Line, smiling. *I won't be sending ships after the Straw Hats. No, I will simply be using resources already on hand for another job. It's high time we brought that project to an end, anyway.*

Leaving his own office, Akainu moved down to one of his protégés, Vice Admiral Onigumo.

He was a tall man, about as tall as Akainu, with a cold face and eyes which were semi-closed almost all the time. He had long brown hair, although most of his hair was normally

obscured by a war helmet, he had taken from a Wano Pirate, with a long red plume hanging from it. Like most marines of captain rank or higher, under his Marine coat, he wore a suit. In Onigumo's case, this was a gray suit coupled with a silver tie. He also has a golden loop earring on his left ear, which he was touching gently with one hand while he wrote out a report with his other hand.

He stopped instantly as he looked up from his desk to see Akainu there, hopping to his feet and saluted crisply. "Sir!"

"Do you have a map of Paradise here?"

"Yes, sir!" the man barked.

Quickly, the map was brought out, and Akainu smiled even wider and far more dangerously. "How long does it take a fleet to get from Enies Lobby to Water 7?"

"With an Eternal Pose? Two hours," the man answered promptly. He and several other Vice-Admirals had been kept on here at Marineford to back up CP-9 at Water 7 if necessary. Such was the danger of Pluton.

"Good. You will take a full Buster Call flotilla to Enies Lobby. You will wait there for further orders. I will send you an Eternal Pose for Water 7 once you are on station."

The man's eyes widened. "Sir, I thought it was decided a Buster Call was too extreme? I don't have any objections, but..."

"That place created the ship of the Pirate King and has continued to build ships for anyone with money enough to pay for them, including other pirates. Moreover, the secret of Pluton will be... retrieved by other allies who are already in action on the island. You will be given the means to contact them before you leave. But beyond that, the main goal of this will be a crew of pirates that might arrive there. You will receive a package of further information about them, but that crew, not Water 7 itself, is the main target of this Buster Call. I want you to know, Onigumo, these pirates are to be considered a threat to the world, well beyond any of the other Supernovas. They must be captured or killed, no matter the cost. In the name of Absolute Justice!"

"Yes, Sir! For Absolute Justice!" Onigumo replied instantly and very fervently.

As Onigumo left to get things started, Akainu smiled down at the map, one finger slowly turning into magma as he made an X mark on Water 7. *It is about time that island suffered for its connection to Roger, and we can remove at least three threats to world peace at the same time. Absolute Justice demands no less.*

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More than a week after Luffy had initially recovered consciousness, Sanji was on watch in the crow's nest, still internally bemoaning that Luffy and Robin were now together. *Thankfully neither of them seems to like public displays of affection. I'm not certain I could take that. And while one of the ladies is no longer available, at least two others still are. And Makino-swan has never seemed bothered by my flirtations with her either. Still, how could Robin, a sweet extremely experienced, woman of the world, come to have true feelings for a Luffy?* That defied the chef's world view to a certain degree.

From the main deck rose the sound of wood cracking against wood, and Sanji turned his attention down to see Nami working out with a wooden staff against Laki and Luffy. Luffy was nowhere near up to his own standards of ki, as he put it, but he was at least moving around and could direct the contest.

The staff in question was Laki's first foray into trying to create a weapon for Nami. It was an interconnected series of smaller segments, each of them around a foot in length. Dials had been situated in each segment, a different type in each segment. The bulbous spheres caused the staff to seem almost like a child's toy. But there was no doubting their efficacy, Sanji thought, watching as the end of one segment suddenly blazed with a short heat-dial-based blade as she cut at Luffy. *And oh my, am I glad Luffy is in his female form right now.*

The ship had suffered a squall that morning, the first of many Nami feared they would see. "Although it will be just rain today, with just a bit of baseball-sized hail later," the navigator had reported earlier.

Rather than transform between his two forms, Luffy decided to just put up with it but hadn't bothered to change her clothing, leaving the girl without a bra. Luffy was so muscular her breasts didn't bounce all that much, but even so, it was a nice show for the cook.

Luffy dodged the lance of heated oxygen kicking out as the other end of the staff came up, blocking a blow from Nami's other staff section, which would otherwise have taken her in the chest. The Impact Dial's blow still hurled her off of his feet, rolling away towards the prow of the ship, where she pounced up easily, smirking. "Damn girl, we know at least there was a reason why you chose a staff all those years ago. You're ambidextrous. Good going. But what do you think about the configuration?"

"Hmm... I don't know. I mean, I like the bracers, that's a given, and Laki, I could seriously kiss you for them!" Nami replied enthusiastically, winking over at the other girl.

"Please don't, but I'm glad you like them," Laki snarked. "Yet I could swear I was hearing a but there somewhere."

The bracers in question were something Laki had designed over the days Luffy had spent unconscious after his battle with Aokiji. They covered Nami's arms going up to her elbows and were painted light blue, a perfect match for Nami's orange hair. The inner palms contained Impact Dials, and somehow Laki had used some of the rubber and other material from the

Rainbow Mist to connect the Dials to the rest of the device. Any impact anywhere on the bracers was transferred into the dial to be released when Nami performed a palm thrust.

"Er, well, it's just I'd like to have some long and mid-range combat ability. I want to train myself more in hand-to-hand, but it'll never be my favored method of combat. Maybe, um... maybe something I can use to attack multiple enemies or something that ties into my ability to use the weather? Or like, a grappling hook or something, which I can attack or use to move around with?" Nami scowled. "Sorry, I'm not doing a good job of explaining this.

"Ooh, something that will let you create your own tornadoes?" Luffy teased, throwing an arm around the mikan-haired girl. "Those dials can do stuff like that, right?"

At that, Nami snapped her fingers and turned, pointing at her currently female captain. "By the way, what did you not use that technique? Surely you could have created the hot front needed."

"I could have, but I decided against it. Even if it worked, there are ways that Aokiji could get out of it. Simply shifting his presence into the ice underneath us would be the easiest or just turning himself into the ice in midair and riding it out. I would've had to enter the hurricane and used my Busoshoku technique to hurt him then. Besides, that technique is more of a crowd-pleaser than a one on one thing. Although if I ever meet the Akainu, it will come in handy." Luffy cackled a little. "Oh, yes."

"Actually, that's not a bad idea. Heck, hot and cold can combine into a lot of different things," Laki murmured, writing down something on a piece of parchment that Nami had given her. "Would you like to keep the Burn Blade or the impact dial on the staff?"

"Burn Blade," Nami replied instantly, pushing Luffy away playfully. *I wonder if Luffy realizes he's a lot more touchy-feely than normal since his fight with that marine Admiral? Ugh, thank goodness she's a female right now, or else I would seriously be reconsidering this whole crush thing.*

This was indeed the case. Even though Luffy's use of the technique was days in the past, Luffy was still dealing with a bit of the inner coldness and lack of emotions the Soul of Ice forced on Luffy when he used it. But Luffy had long thought of a way to combat this: being more emotive and huggy than normal. Robin, who had basically started to share a room with their captain, had reported that most mornings, she could not leave the bed until Luffy had woken up, so tight his (or at times her) arms were around the archeologist.

"Why?"

"I can already deal a lot of damage in the right places with the blunt end of my staff, and if I need to do more damage to a single target, I have these bracers. I think I'd like some way of dealing damage to a lot of people at once. So either replace one of the Impact dials in the bracers, or the one in the staff."

“How do you feel about a flame Dial boosted by an Air Dial?”

“Oooh, a flamethrower!” Luffy chirped. “I like that.”

As Laki and Nami continued to talk, Luffy turned his head away from the girls to look at the entrance to the deck’s hatch, while above her, Sanji’s nose began to gush blood as Robin came out, dressed in a swimsuit. It was one of her normal semi-conservative suits, a white one-piece, but it had a wide V-shaped neckline that showed inches of delectable cleavage and which hugged her sides and rear firmly. She wore her normal boots, shorts, and cowboy hat over the suit, added to the visual impact. “Guh...”

A faint, inviting smile on her lips, Robin made her way up to the aft deck to lay down in one of the lounge chairs.

At that sight, Luffy called a halt to the testing with a wave of her hand before giving Nami and Laki some exercises she wanted the two of them to do. Later, Zoro, who was currently training near the prow himself, would take over their training for a time, building up their muscle strength more along with Chopper’s and Robin’s.

Since the fight against Enel, the entire crew, including Nami this time, had taken to training harder than ever. Makino might not still be able to walk very well, but she was working out with her guns, and on top of working on Nami’s weapon Laki was preparing several more for her, based off of the ‘revolver’ design from North Blue, which she had fallen in love with.

Up in the crow’s nest, Sanji had to pinch his thigh quite hard to pull his attention off Robin, only succeeding in doing so when Luffy laid out next to the taller woman, taking Robin’s hand in her as Luffy laid out beside her.

Shaking his head and resolutely reminding himself that the one real woman below was taken, and the other was a changeling, Sanji turned his attention back to the world beyond the *Resolve’s* decks, lifting his spyglass to his eye. However, as he did, the cook couldn’t stop himself from wondering, *Why did Luffy say we would have a full crew discussion tonight? We have all our meals together most of the time, so why the special announcement? I wonder if it has anything to do with what Robin was doing as the battle against Enel finished?*

Of all the crew, only Sanji had any idea that Robin had been on the lookout for the Goro Goro no Mi reappearing. And Sanji had been very careful to not ask about it before this. *Still, if anything would force Luffy to decide on that thing, facing another even more dangerous logia type would do it.*

He looked to the side as a sudden splash caught his attention. *Ugh, no wool-gathering Sanji, this is the Grand Line! Look away from it, and you won't even realize you're dead before you're sleeping with the fishes. And wouldn't that be an ignominious ending for any cook, feeding an ingredient? And speaking of ingredients, that is...* Sanji’s thoughts trailed off as he stared.

“Oy, does anyone like frog legs?”

Those below looked up in confusion for a second, then Luffy shook her head. “Eh, they’re a little too small and stringy normally. Why?”

“There is a giant frog out there. One doing the breaststroke.”

Luffy blinked, then looked over at the others. “Grand Line Thing™?”

“It's not one I've ever heard of, but I suppose that heading is rather broad anyway.” Despite her curiosity, Robin made no move to leave, instead just closing her eyes behind her sunglasses and concentrating. A moment later, a yelp from above signaled the creation of several eyes situated around the crow’s nest. “although Sanji is indeed telling the truth.”

Ruefully admitting to herself that she too would rather not get up, Luffy still did so, pulling the taller woman to her feet. Putting an arm around her waist, the two of them joined the others at the side of the ship to stare at the sight about a hundred and fifty yards off the starboard side of the ship.

“There really is a giant frog out there doing the breaststroke,” Luffy muttered, shaking his head. “Have I mentioned I love the Grand Line?”

The frog seems to turn glare at them for a moment before putting on more speed.

Nami brows creased in confusion and not a little annoyance. “Is it trying to challenge us to a race or something?”

“It looked as if he was wearing something too,” Chopper announced helpfully from where he had abandoned the wheel after locking it into position.

“He is,” Makino and Laki said together, with Makino bowing to the younger woman to continue. “It looked as if he was wearing some kind of uniform almost. With a word on it. I couldn’t read it, though.”

“Someone's pet then, or perhaps he was a pet sometime in the past?” Luffy shook his head and was about to tell the three training to get back to it when the ship struck something in the water. There was a bonging noise from the prow, and then the ship seemed to skid onto something before halting, listing to the side.

As the others got to their feet after being knocked on their rears, Luffy raced to the prow. “Zoro, Laki, check for any damage below. Sanji with me.”

Laki and Zoro raced down below, and a second later, Luffy stared over the edge of the forecastle down into the water.

“What the hell! What is one of those things doing in the water! Floating in the water!?” Sanji muttered.

"I know, right?" Luffy muttered, staring down at what looked like train rails floating on the top of the water. Luffy had no idea how such a thing was possible, but they were certainly there, and the ship had run aground on it. Normally they would have perhaps been able to ride right over them, but the Resolve had been going so slowly they had instead gotten stuck on top of the rails.

"I have run into the weirdest things since meeting you."

"I know, right," Luffy repeated with a laugh as he turned to look at Nami, who he had assumed was the one speaking.

Nami looked back at Luffy quizzically. "I didn't say anything."

Blinking, Luffy frowned, looking around, reaching under her straw hat to scratch at her hair. "Then who did?"

Robin and Makino, and Sanji all shook their heads, while Chopper had taken over Sanji's position at the crow's nest. The redhead frowned, looking around the ship for a moment, his eyes narrowing. *Hmm...*

As Luffy was looking around, he and the others saw the giant frog stop in its motions through the ocean at the edge of their vision from the deck. It hopped up onto the tracks, and it was clear that the frog was indeed wearing some kind of clothing. What kind, Luffy couldn't make out from here, but it had red and white markings on it at the very least. Then she could make out the frog turning away, and assuming... "Oy, spyglass!"

Nami smacked the redhead's questing hand away, staring through the spyglass she had grabbed, the other one being up with Chopper in the crow's nest. "What the... er, it's taken some kind of martial arts stance and is staring in the other directionNNN!!!" her voice ended with a whoop as Robin's hands suddenly appeared and began to tickle her sides.

The other woman took the spyglass, glanced toward the distant frog, and shook her head. "That looks almost like a Sumo stance, one they take before a match. And if I am not mistaken, the words on the frog's back are some kind of Sumo ranking." Robin handed the spyglass back to Nami, shaking her head cheerfully. "Regardless of the frog's size, I have no doubt that soon it will be turned into so much squished flesh. Although, I would wager the train's crew would rather he not attempt to do so, considering how much guts and blood they will have to clean off the front of their engine."

"Gah, so creepy, Robin!" Nami whimpered, shivering at the very idea.

However, Luffy ignored her girlfriend's morbid sense of humor. Instead, she was staring at the frog, then the tracks, a wild surmise, or perhaps a natural conclusion, going through her mind. "Chopper, please tell me there isn't a train racing along the water towards us?"

For a moment, Chopper was silent from his position in the crow's nest, and when he spoke, his tone was somewhat confused. "Um, do you mean you want me to lie? Er, because there is one out there, and um, it's coming straight towards us."

"Huh, I wonder what that frog thinks it's doing? Is it challenging the train for some reason?" Zoro muttered, having joined the others at the prow. The ship had sustained a few bangs, but there had been no new leaks.

"Who cares? Right, let's get the ship off this thing. "Sanji, Zoro, with me."

The three of them leaped over the sides, and between the three of them were able to lift the front of the ship, slowly shifting the ship to the side and then pushing along until it flopped back into the water, bouncing there for a moment. Just in time to, as in the distance, a whistle was heard.

With Chopper and Luffy looking through their spyglass at the frog, the two of them described what happened to the rest of the crew. The frog, who Luffy could now see had hair up in a topknot, took a sumo stance and threw out a punch to the train as it raced forward on the tracks. The frog looked like it outweighed Luffy in her male body by at least three times but didn't have the strength to match and was smashed out of the way, battered up and then falling back into the ocean.

"Ouch!" Chopper added to Luffy's description. "I think I also saw a lot of scars on that frog. It, it might be killing itself trying to challenge the train. That's kind of sad, really."

The show over, Nami was able to twist the ship around by further use of the jet dials installed into the Resolve below the water line to push them further away. Then the wind caught them, and the Resolve moved further away, putting several ship-lengths between themselves and the train tracks.

As they did, the sea train rushed past, the way now cleared of illegally parked frigates. As far as Luffy could tell, it was a regular steam train, with at least sixteen carriages and what looked like a regular old-fashioned steam engine. But it was going along on the train rails in the water as if it was normal! All in all, it was a very bizarre but also quite cool scene.

As the train slowly started to disappear over the horizon, Zoro leaned back against a guard rail and looking over at his captain. "So, that was a thing. What now?"

Luffy shrugged, then looked over at Nami. "By any chance, does the Log Pose point in a direction moving along those train tracks?"

"Almost, but not quite," the navigator replied, pointing in another direction just slightly off from the way the train had gone. "Close enough, we should be good to follow the tracks for a good while."

Pouting, Luffy looked at her. "Am I that predictable?"

"Yep!" Nami snorted before pointing a thumb toward the rapidly disappearing train. "Besides, that thing interests me too."

"Let's follow these train tracks then, but at a distance. Nami, Laki, Makino, can one of you make them out in the water at this distance?" Luffy couldn't. To her eyes, the tracks had completely submerged out of sight to her, no matter how hard she glared.

Makino and Laki nodded while Nami shook her head. "I can use my scope to see it from here."

"Same with me, although how they created something like that on the Grand Line of all places is bizarre. But then, so is its actual creation in the first place," Makino murmured, shaking her head. "I can see why someone would do something like that, but actually being able to design and build it?"

"Yeah. It should be interesting to discover the kind of guy who could dream big enough to come up with something like that," Luffy agreed with a nod. "Now come on, Let's get a move on, people. And Nami, Laki? That doesn't mean that your excused training. Makino can take first watch with your rifle, Laki."

"Ugh, well, so long as she treats it with care, I guess," Laki grumbled. *My precious...*

They finally spotted something unusual at around mid-evening: A small artificial island, floating in the middle of the ocean made to look like some regular train station. And according to the marksmen among the crew, there was at least one more set of tracks in the water around there. There, Luffy, once more in his male body – with their ship flying the pirate flag, anything else would have been foolish - led the way across.

Hopping out onto the train station cum island's side, Luffy was reminded of Crocus's island from Laboon's stomach for a moment, then noticed that they were not alone. A young girl with big teeth and her hair done in twin pigtails was sitting on the edge of the station's roof accompanied by an equally big-toothed and grinning rabbit. "Hey, kiddo."

"Hello, the girl replied, waving at him, then scowling down at what looked like the train's frontal grating. It had been left to one side of the door leading into the station and looked badly bent.

"Huh, was that done by that gutsy frog guy?"

"Gutsy, hah! Yokozuna's just crazy, and he causes a lot of trouble for us, doing stuff like this!" the young girl muttered, before turning to give more of her attention to the newcomers. "Ah, hey, are you guys pirates?"

Luffy nodded. "Yep. I'm Luffy, and this is my crew. We were wondering if ya could answer some questions for us?"

"Cool. Hey Grandma! Pirates are here!" she yelled.

"Really?" came a voice from inside the building, one that sounded both hungover and elderly. "Hang on, I'll get the Den Den Mushi!"

Before the woman to pick up the Den Den Mushi, Luffy entered the station so fast the young girl blinked, staring at his after image. The old woman in question was a Fishman of some kind, wide, obese-seeming body, with a series of gills, and Luffy idly wondered if she was a Dugong Fishman. She had the same light green colored hair as the girl, who had to be her grandchild, and the same wide, seemingly permanent smile.

She was also extremely drunk. She had a large bottle of whiskey in one hand, and her breath was almost enough to knock Luffy out as he flicked it out of her hand gently. "None of that."

Nami had come in behind Luffy and now threw an arm around the old woman's shoulders. "Now, now," she soothed. "We might be Pirates, but we're not here to do anything. We just want some information, okay? No need to report anything to anyone."

"We would be willing to share some of our food with you if you're hungry?" Sanji asked. Before either child or ancient woman could reply, he brought out his latest creation, a kind of crispy potato hash brown thing.

Without hesitation, the girl grabbed it, chomping down eagerly. "Wow! So tasty. I'm Chimney, that's my grandma, Kokoro, and that's my cat, Gonbe."

She pointed at the rabbit, and every pirate there cocked their heads as one, confusion written plain on their faces. This confusion was exacerbated a second later when the rabbit let loose with a "Meow."

"Right..." Luffy shook his head, then shook his head, jerking a thumb back out the door as Sanji left to get more food for the two of them. "So what can you tell us about the sea train?"

"Nagagagaga, that's the great Puffing Tom. It was made to take people from island to island around here. They've been built over the last, oh nineteen years or so?" the old woman answered, then smiled in delight as Sanji set out the food in front of herself and her granddaughter. "Nagagagaga, that looks great!"

"Hehehe, it's faster, can ignore a lot of the Grand Line's weather, and a passenger can go straight to their chosen island instead of having to use a Log Pose. But Grandma, they ran into Yokozuna too." Chimney interjected.

"Oh, that troublemaker." The woman seemed to become somber for a second, turning from her meal to take a deep draft from her whiskey, which, Zoro had noted with some annoyance, she hadn't offered to share with her guests. "That fool Yokozuna, he's always

challenging the sea train to contests of strength. He loses nine times out of ten but doesn't stop."

"Why?" Chopper asked innocently. "I mean, I saw his scars and everything. Eventually, Yokozuna is going to kill himself. And if he's smart enough to wear clothes and act like sumo, he's got to be smart enough to know that, right?"

"Nagagagaga! Yokozuna thinks the Puffing Tom took his friend away. He's never going to stop until it kills him."

The group was silent for a moment, taking that answer in as the two Fishmen ate their fill. Then Nami asked, "Well, we actually came here following a Log Pose, and it's currently pointing west along with one of the lines of the Puffing Tom. Do you know what island that might be?"

"If it's pointing west? Water 7. That's our home island and the place where the Sea trains were made. It's home to the best ship mechanics in the world. Nagagagaga, even the World Government relies on their ship-making. They're led by the mayor of the island, Iceberg."

When Kokoro had used the name of Water 7, Luffy had to stop himself from shouting in delight. When she then mentioned Iceberg, he couldn't stop himself, and now he threw his hands in the air exclaiming, "Yes!" The others turned to look at him in confusion, and Luffy grinned, pointing at a confused looking Robin. "Don't tell me you never heard of Water 7?"

Robin shook her head. "I've heard of it and know of it as a place where ships are created, but why..."

"It's where the Oro Jackson was created! Hell, I even have the name of a possible shipwright I can look up there from old man Shanks! And where best to refurbish and rearm our ship than the place that made the Pirate King's ship?"

"Shanks, old?!" The woman cackled at that, slapping her thigh. "How time flies! I still remember meeting Shanks when he was a young cabin boy when the Oro Jackson was being made."

"Wait, what?" Luffy was completely derailed by that statement, and he wasn't the only one stunned. "Shanks was part of the Pirate King's crew?"

"...Let's not talk about him right now," Makino scowled, shaking her head. *I know it's childish. I know that my whole reason for coming to the Grand Line is childish, but that doesn't change my feelings.* "Still, that does seem to be a good idea."

"A drydock... oh my, what kind of weapons could I make with our resources and a drydock," Laki sighed dreamily. "I could make our ship into a real monster with that kind of thing."

"I'll give you a letter of introduction to Iceberg in return for the meal," the old woman said, putting her way over to a desk where she pulled out some writing material and scrawled out a quick note, folding it up and handing it to Nami, who took it, and quickly placed it in her cleavage, where it disappeared, causing Sanji to stare, before shaking his head rapidly.

Luffy might have stared too, but he had looked away the moment Nami had begun to lift the note towards her chest, thinking aloud. "I wonder which would be better, Iceberg or Cutty Flam? Shanks gave me Cutty Flam's name, and those were the two apprentices of the man who built the Oro Jackson, right? Tom, I think his name was a Puffer Fish Fishman? But wait, you mentioned Iceberg, but not Cutty Flam. Did he leave the island?"

The woman chuckled, taking another pull from her whiskey bottle. "Leave? You could say that. He disappeared years ago. No one knows where Cutty is, or even if he's alive, your odds of finding him are very low. I'd say Iceberg is your best bet."

Nodding, Luffy and the crew quickly made their farewells, with Sanji leaving enough food for another two meals with the train station workers. Soon the Resolve was again on its way, while behind them, Kokoro stared after them, shaking her head. "A young man with that hat and those eyes? Interesting days are upon us again, it seems. I wonder what will become of it."

That night, after Sanji had once more cooked a sumptuous meal for them - since using up their supplies wouldn't be a problem if they really were within a few days of Water 7 - Luffy looked at his crew, all of them situated around him at the table in the kitchen. "So, Robin and I have a bit of a confession to make. When I was battling it out with Enel, I asked her to try and do the same trick that she used back on Alabasta after I killed Crocodile. It worked," Luffy announced, causing shock and awe to spread through most of his crew bar Sanji who simply nodded in understanding.

"I never wanted to even discuss this with you all with the Marines around, but..." he pulled out the lightning fruit from his ki space, laying the grotesquely marked and overly large pineapple on the table.

Laki scowled angrily, staring at the ugly looking fruit. "This is that fruit, the thing that gave Enel his power?"

"Correct," Luffy nodded, keeping his voice matter-of-fact, knowing that Laki would have issues with this. "Eat it, and you will have the power of lightning, just like Robin has her hand powers, Chopper his Zoan type powers or Hina her lock powers. They all taste horrible according to what I've heard." Luffy looked over at Robin, who nodded her head emphatically. "But it's a one-way power up and a big one. In this case."

"Why haven't you taken it already, Luffy?" Nami asked, frowning. "I mean, I understand not wanting to do so while the marines are around, but now?"

Luffy shrugged. "It would be a piss poor captain who only wanted his own powers to increase. I figured I would ask you all before taking it. Laki, you first."

"But you do want it?" Laki quickly replied.

Luffy paused, thinking, then slowly, he nodded. "Yes. It compliments my own combat style and adds to it, overcoming some of the weaknesses I have in long-range combat. Further, I wager there's a lot I could do with it to the Enel never even thought of." He shrugged again. "But if someone else wants it, I can accept that. Now... Laki?"

Laki stared down at the fruit, then up at Luffy. "I, I don't think so," she said after several moments of silence. "I know why you're offering it to me first, and I appreciate it, but no. For one thing, I prefer to use weapons, things in my hands that I can understand and manipulate. For another, well, as nice as it would be to give Ernest one final 'screw you' and have a Shandian like me gain his powers, I wasn't the one who killed him. You were."

"And you don't have any qualms about being around someone who is using the power?" Luffy asked earnestly.

"I can't say it fills me with great delight," Laki snarled, glancing away as she shuddered, but then turning back to Luffy after only a second, pointing down at the fruit. "But as a weapons designer, I can tell you this. No weapon is evil. It is only the purpose they are put to that can be evil. I'd much rather have that in the hands of someone on this crew, someone who I trust, than the alternative. I'll get over my fright about being around someone using the lightning fruit soon enough."

Laki's lips quirked wryly as she finished with. "Probably the first time I see someone using it to smash my enemies, instead of me and my allies."

Luffy looked over to Makino, who frowned pensively, tapping her finger on the table. "I don't think so," the older woman answered deliberately using the same wording Laki had used previously. "While I'll admit that the allure of that kind of power is intriguing, I'm not a front line combatant, and that kind of ability should go to someone who is going to use it to the best advantage. That isn't me."

She frowned pensively. "Besides, unless I've received a bounty since the last time we heard about such, I currently don't have one. Nami and Sanji have those disgusting pictures, but even with those, they could be recognized. But Chopper and I, and Laki for now, can serve much the same purpose as your female form: infiltrating places where pirates wouldn't be welcome."

Luffy nodded, conceding the point, although he realized that had simply been an addendum to her real reasoning, and he couldn't really say he disagreed with her. Makino was strong, an excellent sniper, and an all-around fantastic gun-fu user, who Luffy felt was

underselling herself when it came to how strong she could become if she kept training. But Makino didn't love combat and would never be the first to embrace it, much like Nami.

With that, Luffy now turned to the orange-haired girl, cocking an eyebrow and quizzically. "What about you? And you, Sanji?"

Standing beside Nami, Sanji slowly shook his head but indicated with a wave of his cigarette that Nami should speak first. Nami took her time, though, thinking deeply before answering. "I think my reasoning is the same as with Makino. I'm not a front line combatant, and I have no desire to be one. I want to get stronger sure, want to be worthy of being part of this crew, and look after myself. But I don't want to be at the center of the hurricane, not like you, Mr. Hurricane Creator," she teased,

With a roll of her shoulders, Nami leaned back, waving the devil fruit away. "Thank you for thinking about me, but that kind of fruit really doesn't interest me all that much. Although, I will say that some of its side abilities, its ability to impact the weather, and manipulate metal, interest me a lot. I don't suppose I could get you to melt some of our gold into a bed for me, could I?"

Luffy laughed, and not just at the joke. That was the first time that he had ever heard Nami actually make fun of her own desires for gold. *That's a great sign, in my opinion.*

He looked over at Sanji, who smirked at him. "Sorry, Captain, it's not for me either. And I'm not just turning it down for the same stupid reasons Zoro no doubt will, that it would be cheating or whatever." Zoro grunted agreement, looking pained at having to do so with Sanji. "For me, there's one Devil Fruit out there that I read about when I was a child. I have always wanted it beyond all others. That's the only fruit I'll ever want."

While Luffy nodded, Zoro frowned, and Makino whispered in his ear. "How much do you want to bet it has something to do with women in perversions in general?"

Zoro smirked, shaking his head. "That's a fool's bet if I ever heard one."

"All right then," Luffy sighed, looking down at the fruit and sticking it back in his ki space, feeling relief, eagerness and trepidation at the thought of eating this fruit and what it might entail. "In that case, I'll eat it tomorrow. That way, I'll have a full day to train with any immediate changes it forces on me."

With that choice out of the way, Luffy looked around at the others. "I do have something else to talk about." He very deliberately leaned back in his chair, putting his head against the wall, one hand rising above his head to smack it lightly with his knuckles. "There is this old story about ships, ships coming alive because of the care of their crew."

The others looked at him in confusion, but Makino and Robin exchanged a glance before Makino assayed a response. "Are you talking about the legend of the Klabautermann? Shanks mentioned that a few times in his pirate tales."

"But it is just a story," Robin added. "There's never been anything substantiated about. Indeed, that's part of the myth: the fact that these little woodcrafters are studious about no one seeing them and why it is still alive despite no scientific evidence proving its existence."

"But you think we have one," Zoro stated, crossing his arms and looking at his captain thoughtfully. Not, Luffy noted, dismissively as Makino and Robin were. "Those odd repairs we found, the really good repair job done on the hinges, and the piss poor job on the inside of the cracks on the busted planks, right?"

Luffy shrugged. "Exactly. And as for there not being any proof Robin, maybe those who have seen them never wanted to share the secret. But I think we need to talk about it now. After all, we've been talking about Water 7 and what might happen there, and we haven't gotten the opinion of the last of our crew. Because this ship is one of our crew just as much as any of us. And I have been feeling a weird ki signature since we boarded back On Skypiea. I know this ship is alive."

"Oh dear," Chopper muttered, hopping up onto the table. He had been silent most of the conversation about the Goro Goro no Mi. He believed firmly that it should go to Luffy, but he wasn't in the running for it, so he hadn't spoken up. Now he skittered across the table, hopping up onto the bench next to Luffy, leaning up with one hoof to take his temperature. "I wonder if his brain took some kind of frostbite -induced damage during his fight with that marine."

"Nice zing, but no." Luffy winked at the short Zoan. "I'm deadly serious."

Nami looked as if she about to join in on the teasing, while Sanji was looking thoughtful, looking over at Zoro as he took a long pole of his cigarette. But before either could speak, Luffy smashed his hand against the back of the woods, not damaging the wood, but creating a loud booming sound. "Resolve, I'm giving you a direct order, sailor! Front and center!"

This worked better than Luffy had expected, frankly. Instantly a little creature appeared to one side of where they were all sitting, saluting sharply. "Yes, sir, reporting as ordered!" Then it went on more hesitantly as its hand fell to its side, and the little creature assumed a parade rest. 'Er, do you, do you really see me as part of the crew? I felt that since we got into the Grand Line, but it's so unusual, I don't remember any of my previous owners feeling that way, I was just a ship to them, and um..."

While Luffy laughed and moved to stand in front of the little creature, the others just stared, and Robin, in particular, felt faint. *How, how is this even possible!*

Nami, on the other hand, looked at the little creature, then Luffy and back before groaning. "Are you going to make a habit of breaking my view of the world?"

"Yes," Luffy answered, not even looking at her.

The being that had just appeared to one side of the table was sized like a regular preteen except for large, elfin ears and hands at least half again the size they should be. And the fact it looked as if two people had been cut in half, and then the left and right half of those people had been merged together split straight down the middle.

One portion of the creature's body was looked like a proper little Marine, white uniform, pantaloons, even half of a dark blue tie, and a white beret on short-cropped black hair. That side's face was almost like that of a pretty boy, soft but stern and just very pretty with no hint of a chest.

The other half of the Klabautermann looked like a girl, a tomboy for certain but still a girl, her one breast looking almost the same size as Vivi's chest, although on her smaller body, it was more noticeable. She had a tiny straw hat that seemed to merge into the cap and bright purple hair. She wore an amalgamation of the outfits that Robin and Nami typically wore: shorts that fell to her knee and a blouse. On the blouse were with the words 'better half' written lengthwise.

Staring at the Klabautermann, Chopper leaped down and staring at the little creature, who was about the same size as his normal body, measuring himself against the odd being. "Yes!" he grabbed the Klabautermann's hands in both his hoofs, shaking them firmly. "Another short person! You have no idea how annoying it gets to be the only short person around here sometimes!"

"Oh my God!" Makino squealed, getting down to on all fours in front of the little creature, putting her arms around him. "Our ship's spirit is so cute! I would never have expected that."

"Unhand me, pirate... er, I mean this feels nice, but I don't... I will arrest you all for steal... er, I mean, do you really..." the Resolve's spirit stammered.

"Our little Klabautermann, our ship, Resolve, is schizophrenic," Sanji muttered, blowing out a drag from his cigarette. "Although considering this ship's history, and our crew, it honestly doesn't surprise me any more than the fact that he, she, undetermined, exists at all."

"I'm a female! All Klabautermann are unless their crews come from places where ships are seen as male," Resolve shouted, both sides agreeing for once. "It's just that my pirate side is more stacked," she added saucily, her face twisting into an expression that would have seemed at home on Nami's face.

Or rather half her face did, the other half seemed to twist into a look of anger, and the marine side made to punch the other. "Ooh, how dare you! It's not my fault I'm flat!"

Makino gently stopped the fist before it could smack the Resolve in her own face. "Now, now, no hurting yourself. Come on, sit down and tell us about yourself."

"I suppose the first question has to be when did you start to... I suppose the word would be 'coalesce'?" Nami questioned, while around her, the rest of the crew continued to stare at the Klabautermann, which seemed to make her very nervous, but the little creature withstood this scrutiny as well as he could.

"I, I'm not certain. I think I started to come awake after the fight with those... I don't remember their name. They were led by that straw man? I remember the concern and fear for my sails that you all had even as you poured on the speed to try and find a doctor for the Princess. But I didn't fully wake up then. The next, er, memory I guess would be during that fight with the Marines and the pirates before we were shot up into the air."

The spirit touched her chest, and the others could see a few patches on her clothing connecting the two disparate sides of the spirit to one another that looked like patches in his clothing, shaking her head. "That hurt. That hurt a lot at the time, but you all did a great job repairing me...eventually. But after that, I was fully awake and, er, aware, I guess?"

"And that doesn't bother you?" Luffy asked quickly. That we fought Marines, I mean? You used to be a Marine ship."

The little creature looked a little confused for a moment. "Er... I don't know. I mean, yes, I've spent most of my life as a Marine ship." The Klabautermann pointed to her marine half. "That's why I'm like this. But..."

Here the personality once more seemed to shift, becoming more aggressive almost, the words coming faster and more certain. "That was all I was to them. Just a ship, just a job. From what little I can remember of that time, none of my crew, even the one who called himself my captain at the time, cared about me or saw me as home. Not like you all do. That's why I've been able to become alive!"

For a time, Nami, Sanji and the others all asked the little Klabautermann questions. Sanji, Laki and Nami were all fascinated by the Resolve's spirit. So was Makino, but she questioned the Klabautermann more about herself and how she thought about things, wanting to make certain that the strange schism visible in Resolve's body wasn't dangerous for the spirit.

It wasn't, and indeed, the creature told them his current double-minded nature would fade. "My body will probably always look like this, more's the pity, but the marine side of my brain will slowly fade away, joining with the rest of my personality." The Klabautermann paused, her speech pattern changing to indicate it was her marine side talking. "At least, that's what I think will happen. It's not like I've ever talked to another ship or anything, so I could be wrong."

Sanji and the two ladies were more interested about what Resolve thought about their adventures, which she exclaimed were, "Kind of awesome. I loved flying! That was so much fun,

seeing the world from so high. The touch of that tentacle creature, though, the octopus, that was kind of disgusting,” the spirit added, falling back into her ‘marine-side’ mode of speech.

“I also I love the new changes, although, as you can see...” Resolve tapped the seam going down her body. “There are still some other repairs that need to be better done. My keel didn't take too much damage, but...”

“But what about our idea to further repair and refurbish you?” Robin asked hesitantly. “If we start doing that... do you feel pain when you are being repaired or when the ship receives upgrades?”

“No. This form, my body, I mean, if you kicked it or something like that, I would feel pain,” Resolve replied, pointing at herself. “If I take damage in a fight, I will feel pain. But if I know that it's coming, like when you all added those awesome Jet Dials? Then I can sort of remove my consciousness from that aspect of me.”

“Just like Aokiji could with his ice,” Luffy said with a nod. “But what about replacing your keel?”

That seems to make Resolve’s eagerness dim. “Yeah, my keel, it’s been battered a bit more than you think, it’s not broken or anything, but... replacing it...” She frowned, standing once more like a Marine as she scratched at her chin.

“I think Captain, that in that case, I would probably have to retreat almost entirely into a specific area of the ship that wasn't directly connected to the keel, or even disconnect somehow from the ship entirely. But I think, I think I could do it. I could even help the project along!” the Klabautermann exclaimed, eager once more. “Ooh, I have been dying to get me some real guns, not those dinky guns the marines left me with, but some of the weapons Laki’s been designing or the Dial stuff and the Rainbow Mist stuff too!”

As the rest of the crew laughed at her eagerness, Resolve wagged a finger sternly at Luffy, seeming almost like Makino in her mannerisms for a moment. “But only so long as I get a say in what's going on like a true crewman, captain, like you told me I was!”

“We’ve got a deal, Resolve,” Luffy intoned firmly, holding out his hand, then hesitated. “Do you mind us calling you Resolve when you're in this form? Or do you have another name you want us to use?” he was tempted to also offer the little creature the Lightning fruit but decided against it. That would be a little too much power in the hands of a being who seemed somewhat childish and flighty. *Besides, it wouldn't help with the wounds the ship's already taken, only stop it from taking more.*

The little Klabautermann cocked her head to one side, thinking. “I, I do not know. Like I said, we Klabautermann are so rare I’ve never even sensed another ship’s spirit, let alone talked to one. So I have no idea if I should have my own name or anything else. For now, call me Resolve. Maybe I'll think up a name for myself if I can read through your books?” the spirit

asked, looking at Robin and Chopper in particular. "I've tried reading over your shoulders a few times, but you all read too fast for me."

They both nodded, and Nami placed a little hand on the creature's head, smiling faintly. *This is one weird and wacky crew, but damn, if I don't like it, even this latest fantastical strangeness!* "In that case, Resolve, pull up anchor and let's get a move on. To Water 7."

Once more, the Klabautermann's marine side came to the fore, and the little spirit saluted, and Luffy could hear the sound of the anchor slowly rising as the others made their way out onto the main deck. "Aye, Aye, Ma'am! To Water 7!"

End Chapter