

Have to apologize guys. Boa is the family name, not the first name LOL. How I missed that I don't know but it came to me while watching One Piece. Grah.

Chapter 33: Crowded Conditions and Conversations

“Yohohohoho! Look look, my shadow!!! It has returned! Really, I cannot thank all of you enough for this!” Brook chortled as he stared under his feet, where his shadow followed his movements flickering in the light of the nearby lamps, leaning against the wall to create a perfect triangle between shadow, wall and skeleton body.

Shaking his head, Franky chuckled, staring around him, because Brook wasn't the only one who had gotten their shadows back. Lola, the two Risky Brothers (whose names Franky had decided he didn't care to know, they appeared really annoying, like dark, male mirrors of Kiwi and Mozu) and every other member of the Moria Victim's Alliance who had come with Lola to try and spring the Kuja and Straw Hats had gotten their shadows back.

While Brook seemed more intent on taking up weird positions to make his shadow follow his body's command, the rest were just dancing around like the storage area was a dance club, with utter joy on their faces. Personally, Franky felt their dances were kind of lame, but given how tired he was, and the looks of growing annoyance on the Amazon's faces, he had decided not to show them how it was done just yet.

While the MSA wasn't willing to question their good fortune, Franky figured that the number of shadows being returned in so short a time could only mean one thing: that Luffy-aniki had brought the lightning. *Seriously, how strong is our captain at this point with that particular logia? I've seen some of what he can do, but with that brain of his and that power, who knows what he could think up? I wish he'd train with it more, but I guess it's a toss-up. Get stronger himself, or help his crew get stronger instead.*

Shaking that thought off, he looked over at Lola. “Yo, Big-lips, you think that we should get moving? If the zombies out there have mostly lost their shadows, the way should be clear, right?”

Lola stopped dancing around, while Ran nodded firmly and barked a command to her fellow Kuja. Franky wasn't certain whatever her position was with them, or if she was just bossy like a certain orange-haired nee-chan, but it was clear that, while most of them were still dealing with their wounds, the Kuja were no longer willing to just wait around. “Agreed. Let's get moving, ladies!”

"I'd prefer to stay here. If Moria somehow wins... well, we're all screwed," Lola admitted but shrugged. "Still, let's get going. At least if we're on the move, it will be easier for the others to find us." When their shadows started to show up, Lola had sent several of her fastest runners out to the forest to see if they could find their fellows.

Then Lola grinned, and when Marriage Proposal Lola grinned, it was something to see, her smile almost as wide as her body was thick. She turned to the Risky Brothers and shouted, "And hey, maybe we can start ransacking the place! Right boys!?"

The pirates among the survivors all whooped in even greater delight, and many of them shouted out, "Yeah, let's get some of our own back here!"

As the others began to leave their prison-turned defensive bulwark, Franky looked over at Makino and Laki. Both women still lay where Chopper had been working on them. Neither of them had even moved since Chopper had operated on them and Franky had to grimace at the sight. *Luffy and the others trusted me to watch the ship with them and look at those ladies now. Some super-strong bastard I am!*

The fight against the Kuja had been a wake-up call for him for certain. *I might have held my own against the regular Kuja, but that Marigold gal, she was pounding me into the ground, and even then, I think I got under her skin so much she wasn't even fighting her fight, she was fighting mine and still winning!*

Scowling, Franky moved over to the girls, kneeling beside them as he looked over their wounds once more, making certain it would be okay to move them. That was not a small consideration since Laki's spine had been bruised and she'd lost a lot of blood from wounds to her chest and abdomen. Makino was better off, but the makeshift thing around her jaw to keep it still looked really fragile.

Yet even as he looked them over, Franky's thoughts were about the fight and how he could get better. *Unfortunately, given my cyborg body, there's only so much I can get out of training with Luffy. Heck, Tekkai wouldn't do anything my cyborg body doesn't already give me. Geppo could be interesting, but my legs are mostly robotic, so I don't think I could strengthen them much. So, I'd have to be able to skip straight to Haki, and I have no idea if that's even possible.*

He paused suddenly, cocking his head to one side as a shiver went down his spine. There had been a noise just then, a low, almost keening kind of creak. And as a Shipwright who had spent more than a decade taking ships apart, Franky could recognize every sound aboard a ship, no matter how unusual that ship might be. *And we are pretty near the bottom of the ship here, right?*

But Franky couldn't quite make it out over the jubilant hollering from Lola and the others, who were apparently now arguing with the Kuja about something Franky hadn't heard

over his own thoughts. Scowling, he put his large hands to either side of his mouth and shouted, "Shut up, everyone!"

While Lola and the others obeyed, the Kuja turned as one, looking very angry at a man barking orders at them. One of them, one of the larger Kuja marched over to him, her finger raised to thrust into his chest.

But before she could, Franky lay down on the ground, placing his ear to the floor. This sight caused the Amazon to pause and for the rest of her fellow Kuja to fall silent, staring at the large man in confusion.

Franky lay there for a moment, then his eyes widened before there was a loud creak from somewhere nearby. It was like someone had just taken the most creaky kind of door and begun to move it back and forth. It was just a weird noise for the rest of them, and Lola and the rest of the survivors were prepared to put it down to regular Thriller Bark strangeness. After all, the whole place was designed to be a mix of a horror show and a haunted house.

But to Franky, it was the same kind of sign a miner would see if the canary stopped singing. He hopped to his feet, pointing towards the door quickly, his face noticeably paler than it had been. "Right, that whole moving thing just went from a suggestion to an order! Thriller Bark is sinking, and I don't know about you, but I do not want to go down with it. Brook, grab up Makino."

"Wait, what!" Lola shrieked, even as Franky turned away, picking up Laki, blinking a bit as he leaned Laki's chest against his upper arm. *Huh, while she's kinda tomboyish, Laki's still got curves in all the right places. Just not as much as the other nee-chans on the crew.*

Shaking his head at that, and wondering if he had taken a few too many hits to the head, given how his thoughts kept getting derailed as he bellowed, "Move it or lose it!"

He charged forwards towards the door, Brook following behind him unquestioningly. While they hadn't had much time together, Brook knew Franky was the Straw Hat's bosun and had built their magnificent ship, so Brook wasn't about to question him.

The survivors and Kuja made way for the two of them even as Lola raced along besides, shouting, "Wait, what do you mean Thriller Bark is sinking?!"

"This whole place is a ship, one of the world's largest but still a ship!" Franky explained, his voice level even as he raced along so fast Brook had trouble keeping up with him. "And you have to calculate buoyancy, weight, and a whole lot of other things to keep a ship this big floating or not pulling itself apart. The ship's taken so much damage that it's tossed off those calculations. It's breaking in places due to the different pressures on different aspects of its hull. And guess where the most weight, and thus no longer distributed weight, is!? And we were on one of the bottommost layers."

Even as he spoke, they reached the stairwell leading up. But as they did, one of the walls behind them began to crack. Several stones seemed to crack and then disintegrate in place, followed by one stone bursting out, with dirt and water cascading in.

“A ship this big isn’t going to go down with a finger flick,” Franky reflected aloud. “But it will be going down soon.”

“In other words, Yohohohoho, we must flee! Flee for our very existence!” Brook shouted. “I have my shadow back now, and I refuse to die for real this time. At least not before I see a hundred panties and Laboon once more!”

“Priorities, bone man!” Franky guffawed, while the Kuja and Survivors Alliance followed as best they could behind them. Despite how battered they were and the fact several were carrying their more wounded members, the Kuja were in far better shape than the Survivors and began to push their way past them.

Soon the large group reached the main floor of the mast-keep, and they all paused as Franky stared around him in some confusion. “I don’t know where to go from here. Blast it.”

“Where would they be keeping Sandersonia and Marigold?” Ren questioned quickly. “We have to save them too or Hebihime-sama will never forgive us.” She shuddered at the end, and many of the other Kuja looked worried.

“The way to the back of the keep, where they took our ships before they destroy them, is that way,” Lola gasped, catching up to them with Franky, pushing through her people and the Kuja with difficulty. “They’ll be somewhere along that route. And hopefully, we’ll find some ships for ourselves too.”

With that, she took the lead, and the crew raced after her, while behind them, more crackling noises could be heard.

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, Sanji stood up, staring down at the barely human-shaped bruise that had been the Invisibility Devil Fruit user. He hadn’t learned the bastard’s name, and in Sanji’s opinion, the bastard didn’t deserve a name. Not only had he broken Sanji’s dream of finding the invisibility fruit for himself, but the bastard had even gone further, attempting to marry Nami! How horrible was that!?

“To top it off, you then decided to achieve the trifecta, to, to truly achieve the perverts, er that is, the gentlemen’s dream!” Sanji muttered. “Marrying not only such a beauty like Nami, but another beauty on top of that! How dare you! How dare you achieve something like that when I haven’t...”

Shaking his head Sanji moved off, only to pause, staring at the floor, which had just creaked alarmingly under his weight for a second before giving out in segments. One portion of the wall suddenly disappeared into what amounted to a sinkhole, and behind him, an even louder crack caught his attention.

He turned, staring at where the mangled body of the bastard had been, but where there was now a large crack that disappeared out under the walls of the church, shattering those walls and disappearing in either direction. Moving to the edge, Sanji stared downward and saw rapidly rising brown sludge. "Right, I think I've overstayed my welcome."

With that, Sanji turned, racing as fast as his badly wounded leg could carry him. "Thank goodness for the bastard I call a captain. Without his endurance training, the pain of my leg might well have made me unable to move at all. I'd never admit it to him, though. Luffy's got too big a head as it is. Damnit, I need my cigarettes!" he grumbled as he moved on, while the creaking noises grew all around him."

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Elsewhere, Perona scowled as she tried to drag a bag of gold over to where the Everlasting Resolve had been anchored. "Ugh, maybe I should work out a bit more? NO! This is what menials are for... darn it, I'm really going to miss my cutey zombies."

Grumbling, she moved up the gangplank, tossing the bag to one side, grumbling all the while. "Darn it, Master... er, former Master Moria, couldn't you have waited before taking my helpers' shadows back?"

Eve, watching from nearby from a conjured eye could see Perona was almost in tears despite her tart tone.

Once the bag was on the deck, Perona paused, staring back over her shoulder, a pout on her face. "Blast it... I'm going to miss Kumashi, and the others, even if all of them tried to talk, which wasn't cute at all!"

Okay... that's weird, right, Eve thought, a large sweatdrop appearing on the flank of the turret where her eye had appeared. *She sounds really remorseful and sad one minute, then biting the next. Is this that Tsundere thing Luffy and Chopper were arguing about?*

With all of the survival instincts of an experienced pirate, Perona had known the instant Zoro told her about Luffy's lightning powers that her boss was going to lose. Lightning versus shadow, no way was Moria going to win that. Not even with the help of two other Shichibukais, especially if one of them might turn on Moria if she learned about what had happened to her crew.

So Perona had gotten, while the getting was good. And like any good pirate should, she thought about the gold. With her zombies still following her orders, she had headed straight to the treasure room. But even as the cutesy zombies had moved the treasure to the Straw Hat's ship and brought it to the docks, they had started to lose members steadily.

Now there were none left, and Perona had been forced to drag this bag of gold herself! *And I'm leaving more than half of Moria's gold behind too.* That annoyed Perona somewhat, but she tried to be philosophical about it as she picked up the bag once more, moving towards the hatch leading into the ship. "After all, better alive with some gold than dead with all of it."

As she entered the ship, Perona shivered, staring around her. But there was nothing there, and setting the gold down in the already somewhat full treasure room, she talked to herself once more. "Nerves, that's all it is. Just nerves."

Nearby, Eve snickered aloud, and Perona twirled, staring around her for a second. But seeing nothing began to move towards the stairs leading back to the main deck.

At first, Eve had been worried when the weird-looking zombies had boarded her, and a part of her had thought about firing at them. But that was still a bit too much. Eve couldn't go against her Klabautermann instincts to act in such a way that couldn't be explained away. The zombies had then pulled the ship until the *Everlasting Resolve* was directly against the docks. And there were so many of them aboard Eve that she couldn't even force her hands out to trip or otherwise bother them, except for when a few were within her hull rather than out on the deck.

Thankfully, that had changed over time as the zombie began to die. That still made Eve grin, knowing what that meant, and she had decided to wait to see the zombies bringing more gold aboard, something she knew her navigator would approve. *Let's hear it for my captain, chief ass-kicker! And now this girl's the only one here... I can deal with one person, and since she's not bringing aboard any more gold...*

Eve's hands began to appear behind Perona only to pause as Perona reached the hatchway onto the main deck, stopping to listen to nearby shouts.

"There's the ship, super! The zombies must've brought it around to make it easier to unload."

That was Franky's voice and so was very welcome to Eve. The background noise of other voices and the loud female voice that replied wasn't so much. "Damn it! Your ship looks to be the only one here. And if *Thriller bark* is sinking, we'll have to all fit aboard it somehow."

"Now, that isn't going to be so super, but I suppose you're right about that."

“OY! Franky, there you are! You would not believe the temerity of that Invisibility Devil Fruit user! And... oh my, who in the world hurt all these lovely ladies!? They need some manners beaten into them, er, no, wait, we were fighting them, right? Apparently, Chopper and... gah, that’s right, Laki-chwan!? Makino-chwan! Franky, you bastard, how could you let them get hurt like that!”

Eve allowed one eye to appear on the outer hull, which let her look at the docks. There, three very different groups had begun to congregate. One was Franky and Brook, carrying Makino and Laki. The sight of the two girls had incensed the newly arrived Sanji, who was now hopping on one leg through the air over the heads of two other groups. His eye, previously a heart, had now turned into a raging fire as he stared at the badly wounded twosome.

One of those groups was the Kuja pirates, who had previously attacked the Straw Hats. Eve could actually understand why they were there. She had seen the zombies betray them after all, gathering them up and talking about how they would take the Kuja’s shadows. So, their presence was understandable. *But what is up with all the homeless people? Where did they even come from? I know pirates are supposed to be mostly dirty and scruffy, but these people take that to an extreme. And that woman’s mouth scares me.*

“Hey cooky, I tried my best! You try to fight off an entire crew of Grand Line vets who use some weird Haki-knockoff!” Franky barked back. “Did you see Chopper?”

“No, but I beat the fact he saved Nami and a Kuja named Marguerite out of that lion-faced bastard,” Sanji replied, taking Makino from Brook, hissing in shock at the wounds on her. If they had been caused by any man, Sanji would have gone on a manhunt to remove their spine regardless of who it was. But as it was, Sanji just had a vague sense of all-empowering anger left in him. “Sinking into that chasm was too good for him.”

“Oh, wow, you sound so passionate! Please marry me!” Lola said to one side, staring in delight at Sanji, inwardly leaping about at the sight of another hotty in the Straw Hats.

Looking over at her, Sanji inwardly quailed, but his good manners and glib tongue came to his aid. “Alas, Madam, I am afraid that my heart belongs to the sea, and while I am certain you are a magnificent woman, I cannot give the remainder of it to someone who is not aboard my crew.”

Even as she snickered at that, Eve shook her invisible head. *Too many people! And these aren’t zombies either. I’ll have to wait to tell the crew about Perona.*

For her part, Perona was also listening in on all this, then looking around wildly and racing back down into the ship, heading into the treasure room, ducking inside and hiding in the corner behind several bags of treasure and beli. *I could probably take all of them on, a few dozen Mini Hollows and some negative hollows to soften them up. But if I did that, and their*

captain showed up... Perona shivered. No, best to hide for now and then escape on the ship's small boat as soon as possible.

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Luffy and those with him had gone barely a hundred yards, before Luffy tossed Nami towards Zoro. "Here, Zoro, catch."

Zoro stumbled for a moment, but he had already put away his swords and caught Nami easily as she shrieked, "What the hell Luffy? I'm injured here!"

"I need to go get Robin. Chopper, lead Zoro back to the ship and Zoro, you better keep him in sight. I do not want you getting lost at this point," Luffy quipped.

At that shot across his bow, Zoro twitched in anger, but Chopper nodded firmly, pausing momentarily, to look at Zoro. "Right Zoro, keep your eye on Nami and me. I found he responds well to smacks upside the head or pulling his hair."

"What is this, pick-on-Zoro-day?!" Zoro grumbled.

"If you just admitted you had a problem, we wouldn't be picking on you. Think of it as corrective therapy," Nami answered, then tugging Zoro's head sharply to redirect him after Chopper, as he had been about to turn in an entirely different direction. "How the hell can you do that, honestly!? Is this some kind of attention disorder thing?"

Nearby, Hancock watched this with some amusement, while Marguerite clung to her, slowly turning incandescent in embarrassment. "H, Hebihime-sama, I, I can run on my own!"

"Not very quickly, nor for very long with those injuries," Hancock snapped, staring down at her with a look somewhere between haughty disdain and well-hidden concern. "Don't worry about it. You don't weigh nearly enough to bother me."

"I, it's not that," the blonde muttered, wondering why Hebihime-sama was wearing such a strange shirt but not having the courage to bring it up. But even though her face retained a fiery flush to it, she subsided as they raced alongside Zoro and Chopper.

"Don't argue. Just tell me what happened since you attacked the Straw Hats," Hancock ordered. After a second, Marguerite began to comply, still blushing in embarrassment.

With no one in his arms, Luffy zoomed across the landscape, his passage a blur of lightning flashes as he made his way towards the center of the island. There he found most of the mausoleum still intact for the most part, thankfully, and within, he found Robin's statue.

Grabbing her up and taking her back outside into the wan, cloudy light, Luffy breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the statue hadn't been injured or damaged in any way. "I'm back, Robin. Don't worry, we'll get you back to your old skin and bones self as soon as possible. I beat Boa, and she will free you as soon as we're back at the ship... FUCK, but I hope you weren't aware of anything like this. Being stuck in a dark place like that and unable to move would be a freaking nightmare."

Not wanting to chance harming the stone in any way, Luffy reverted to using Geppo and Soru to race away, heading to where he had sensed Eve's personality. Around the ship, Luffy could sense Franky, Sanji and more than seventy minds he didn't recognize. *What the heck, okay, some of those have to be Kuja. But the rest of them?*

There, Luffy came upon a strange sight. The Kuja had retrieved Sandersonia and Marigold tied up to the docks with most of their body submerged. Though still quite out of it, they were arguing with a crew of raggedy-looking homeless people.

While not understanding all the players in this argument, Luffy figured out what was going on pretty easily. *They must've been the minds I occasionally sensed throughout the island. Wish Chopper had had time to tell us more about what had been going on when I fought the Shichibukai. Damn, and I can feel more of them arriving.* The fact that they seemed to be arguing about space aboard his ship was something else entirely, as was the fact Sanji and Franky were trying to shout them all down.

Whatever that was about, he didn't know nor care, and Luffy set Robin down and raised a hand to the sky. A crackle of lightning lashed down to crash into a nearby stone, of course not Robin's statue, and he shouted, "Shut up, all of you!"

At his appearance and the splash of lightning, everyone quieted down, while his currently-awake crewmen breathed sighs of relief. Moving forward with the statue in hand, he pointed at the two loudest Kuja, figuring they were in charge. "You two. I've made an agreement with your captain under parley. We're no longer fighting. But that is my ship, and yours was sunk. So, I'm willing to let you all board but watch your manners, got it?"

Growling Marigold made to transform and attack, angered at being spoken to like this, both by a man and by a rookie, no matter how dangerous. "Damn it, you think you can talk about Hebihime-sama like that!?"

"Yeah, I do," Luffy growled back, the half of his body not currently carrying Robin turning into lightning, his hand coming up and pointing at Marigold. "Do you wanna argue with me?"

Seeing the logia power in action, Marigold slumped back, letting her slightly less belligerent sister grip her shoulder and pull her away. "I... I accept that you have parlayed with our captain and will comply with her side of the bargain," the green-haired sibling said. Her

tongue flicked out nervously as she stepped away, shivering at the idea of facing Monkey D. Luffy. She had read the portfolio about him and knew she and Marigold would barely register as a threat.

“Good.” Luffy pointed to Franky. “Franky, you want to explain what’s going on here? Besides the Kuja, I mean.”

“Er, these’re survivors of Moria, Captain,” Franky said, mock saluting as he spoke. “There’s more than a hundred of them, and something like thirty plus Kuja. We were arguing about loading priorities.”

Luffy grimaced at that and glanced around. “And there’re no other ships?”

“Alas, there are not, Luffy,” Brook announced from behind the crowd. “I just returned from running around to check on that fact. There seems to be a small dinghy, but I doubt more than seven people could sit on it, perhaps more if they were very friendly, Yohohohoho! But no more than that.”

“And this isn’t everyone yet, either... Crap,” Luffy grunted, and for just a moment, he wished he had a bit more of a normal pirate’s attitude towards the lives of others. *Then again, even most pirates wouldn’t just leave other pirates behind to drown. Sure, kill them and fleece their corpses, but not let them actually drown.* That was part of the pirate’s code, amusingly enough. “I don’t sense anyone else around the island, but I sense five in the mast-keep thing, and Zoro and Hancock coming this way with the others.”

“Er... sense? Oh, you have Kenbunshoku! Amazing, and you beat Moria too. I’m Marriage Proposal Lola, leader of the Moria Survivors Alliance. Thank you so much for freeing us. Please marry me!” Lola quickly realized what Luffy was talking about, and though a little bemused by the fact that Monkey D. Luffy had made somehow peace with the Pirate Empress, she pushed past that to concentrate on the most important thing.

“Hell no,” Luffy answered simply, shaking his head. “You’re not my type.”

“Ah, and it’s a harsh burn for the four-thousand, four hundred and forty-sixth rejection!” Two other people began to dance around Lola, one with a thief’s mask, the other with orange hair that looked like it had been electrocuted.

But after a second spent staring, Luffy decided to ignore that, asking instead what the five people he could sense in the mast-keep were doing.

“They’re trying to ransack the place. We wanted to grab as much gold and food as we could,” Franky said, while Sanji added that the attempt to get more food had failed. Both kitchen and larder had been destroyed from some stray impact earlier.

“Did someone say gold!?” Nami announced her presence at that point as Zoro landed out of the air. Chopper had joined Nami and was sitting on Zoro’s head. The two Kuja arrived a bare second later. “Are you talking about Moria’s treasure!? Woohoo!”

“Heh, you’re feeling better, I see,” Luffy snarked.

“Bah, no offense, Chopper, but belis are the best medicine for me!” Nami sang, jerking her thumb towards Zoro. “You don’t need Zoro with you here. Let me take him and gather as much of Moria’s treasure as possible. Don’t make me beg, Luffy.”

“I probably should, and I still say your priorities are skewed, but... Franky, you think we have time?”

When his captain looked his way, Franky shrugged. “No idea, Captain. The ship’s settled lower in the water twice since we got to the Everlasting Resolve, and that noise is getting louder, but where that puts it on the scale of breaking as it sinks, I don’t know. I’ve never worked on a ship this big with this much weight in the center and so little weight around the edge.”

“Alright, Chopper, you’re in charge of getting the wounded aboard. Zoro... go with Nami. But if you see walls starting to come down...” There was a distant crash, and Luffy finished in a drawl, “Get her out of there, okay?”

“Oh, look, it’s the tanuki,” one of the Kujas teased, while Chopper hopped off Zoro’s head.

“OH mighty tanuki, please help us with our wounded!”

Instantly Chopper hopped off Zoro’s head and turned into his muscle form, roaring at them. “By Davy Jone’s hair scrotum, I am a reindeer!!! GRAAAAH!!!” Then he scowled, moved forward and took one of the wounded Kuja into his arms. “But fine, I’ll help you with your wounded. Stupid Oath...”

The Kuja all laughed, and some of the tension that had been in the air since Luffy’s brief show of power dissipated. Hancock too, who had been staring at the little reindeer since he had transformed to perch on Zoro’s head, came out of it, patting her cheeks delicately. *Must ignore the shocking amount of cuteness...*

She looked back at Luffy, as he gestured to her. “Boa, it’s time for you to fulfill the first part of our bargain.”

“You insolent cur!” Marigold, Sandersonia and many Kuja shouted, although some of them were wondering why their Pirate Empress was wearing a shirt that looked so similar to that of their enemy. A few even wondered if it might have mind control properties and if that

was how Luffy had forced their Empress into this 'bargain.' "How dare you speak to Hebihime-sama like that!"

"Stop it!" Hancock ordered curtly, taking her possibly patented haughty stance, staring down her nose at her crew so much she was looking up at the gray sky above. "There is no more need or time for us to allow our natural inclination to distrust men to get in the way of our survival. I have indeed made parley with Monkey D. Luffy. There is peace between our crews now and I will not have our crew be the ones to restart hostilities."

Not when he could just leave us here to drown or demand far more of me than I was willing to agree to before, she thought to herself. I know he will not, indeed, I... For some reason, Luffy's promise to never mention the former slave mark on her back returned to her and Hancock had to fight back a wry smile as she looked at Luffy. Hancock was done fighting Luffy for more reasons than just the imminent sinking of Thriller Bark. We were fighting on the wrong side here all along. And perhaps... perhaps this will open up possibilities...

Luffy looked back, and a wry twinkle came to his eyes as his gaze lost most of its sternness. Like Boa, Luffy had come to understand the Pirate Empress during their fight and knew that a lot of her normal hauteur was an act.

Her crew quickly sufficiently cowed, Hancock turned back to Luffy and the statue of his crewwoman. Nico Robin had been frozen in the moment of turning, her hands across her chest as she attempted to use her power. Now, with a another beam of her power, Hancock reversed her Devil Fruit's curse on the woman.

In seconds, Robin's statue-like form shifted, disappearing as Robin came alive once more. Her previous frozen position now overbalanced her, and she stumbled, only to be caught around the middle by Luffy. "Easy there. Robin, you've been turned to stone for a while."

Robin shook her head for a few seconds and then found the arm around her waist tightening. Looking around, Robin became aware that they were not in private, which, she reflected, was probably why Luffy wasn't being more effusive. Robin was thankful for that at present and her faculties came back quickly.

"Is that what that was? I could feel myself freezing, but that is my last conscious impression," she announced, pushing on Luffy's shoulder as she wiggled her fingers and toes. "My extremities feel a little stiff, but other than that, I feel if not one hundred percent, then at the least, combat-capable."

She looked around quizzically, then looked at Luffy. "Would you care to fill me in on what has happened? It looks as if we have made peace with two disparate groups here. You'll note I'm not asking how we have survived against three Shichibukai or why two of them seem to not be among the groups we have made peace with. I imagine that last is rather obvious."

“Sort of,” Luffy said, wagging his hand back and forth. “Boa and I at least hammered out a truce, although most of that is based on information she’s going to share with us later.” Robin looked interested in that, but Luffy turned away, saying teasingly, “But I don’t think we talked about my allowing your crew onto my ship like this. Maybe I should ask for more?”

Boa snorted, waving that off. “A false bluff. I doubt you would be willing to not only go against the common pirate code and your own by leaving us to drown when Thriller Bark sinks.”

“True, although we might come back to you all paying your way when we’re out of here,” Luffy said with a nod, while Robin looked between them, as did the Boa’s sisters, confusion on her face. But then Luffy turned his attention back to Robin. “Scout around Robin. I want you to start helping Nami and Zoro. They’re off to find this ship’s treasure room. Can you concentrate on that and...”

He paused, looking over at a large-lipped, rather egg-shaped woman. “Hey, Lola, is this all of them? I mean, this lot and the five still in the mast-keep thing?”

“Er...” Quickly counting, Lola realized that some of her crew was still out there. “Um, there should be another twenty-two people out there. But I don’t know how many of them are still alive. Our base was destroyed, and I had to split us up between those who could fight and help your crew and those who couldn’t. So, there was no time to search for other survivors.”

“Hmmm... I don’t think I could concentrate on my Toile d'yeux (Web of Eyes) and using a Route De Mains (Road of Hands) at the same time,” Robin demurred.

“Okay, spend five minutes spreading your Toile d'yeux as far as possible. I can’t sense anyone else within my Kenbunshoku range, but I know I wouldn’t sense someone unconscious. And if we can manage it, I don’t want to leave anyone behind.”

“I think it’s been said before, but are you sure you’re a pirate?” Robin quipped. But she smiled as she said it, the smile widening as she felt Luffy place his straw hat, previously in his ki space, on her head. “As you command, my Captain,” she teased, closing her eyes and crossing her arms.

Luffy looked at the ship where Franky and Sanji were helping a few more injured Kuja aboard. As they had more recent wounds, Chopper would see to them first. The doctor then came out and seeing Robin was back to normal, he shouted for her attention. “Robin! I need your blood... er, for a transfusion!”

Robin broke off her search, looking up at him in confusion, but after being told about Laki’s need for blood, she raced to help. Luffy nodded at that but hoped they would have time for her to finish her search. *Or I could do it, I suppose, just zoom around everywhere in lightning form, checking every seeming corpse I come across. Damn, that sounds tedious. But...*

At that point, Luffy shook his head. *No. First, see to your own, then look around for other members of this Lola's crew.* With that thought, he looked over to Boa. "If you could pick out a few crewwomen to help Chopper? And a few others to come with me to the supply room? We have a few towels and spare sails we can tear up for extra bandages, and we'll need them. Best to start on that work now, if we're not leaving right away."

Boa nodded, and Luffy looked over at Franky. "Franky, it's your responsibility to keep an eye on the island. If you think we're running out of time, shout it out."

"OW! leave it to the suuuuper Franky, Captain!" Franky announced.

"Brook, help Chopper. The rest of you, just wait here, I guess until we have all the wounded down into Chopper's room." Chopper's room was also the med-bay and was luckily a double room, making it one of the larger rooms aboard the ship. Despite that, Luffy knew that the room would probably get crowded very quickly.

With that done, and Robin back on deck thanks to Chopper's habitual speed, Luffy looked at Sanji, noticing the makeshift spider-silk cast around his leg. "You all right?"

"A few bruises and below the waist, my leg's pretty much just generally broken, Captain," Sanji said, mock-saluting before gesturing down at himself. "Beyond that, I could really do for a smo... er, that is I've got a lot of first degree burns, and need a shirt, obviously. Seems rather minor, really, especially given Laki and Makino's injuries!"

He glared at Franky. "You failed in your sacred duty, you bastard! You were supposed to look after them!"

"Hey!" Franky blustered, getting right up into Sanji's face and thrusting a finger into his chest as they apparently restarted a previous argument. "I did pretty damn well! If not for that invisibility bastard, we would've won!" He then paused and admitted, "Because of Makino, admittedly, and we wouldn't have been in good shape but still."

"Enough," Luffy ordered, his tone mild yet causing both of them to twitch. "The main thing is that we're all alive. Sanji did Chopper..." He looked around for Chopper, who had come out with Robin, but he had disappeared already, having grabbed two wounded from where Franky and the other Kuja had laid them out on deck.

"You see, that right there is the correct reaction. And..." Luffy broke off as a new group of the survivors' alliance appeared, ten of them. Or rather, six walking wounded dragging four other wounded on stretchers. Some of them looked just as alive as a few of the zombies Luffy had seen during their battle in the cemetery and he shook his head. But before he could speak, a booming sound reverberated from near the center of the island, and the water within Thriller Barks moat-like area shivered as if from a distant earthquake

Feeling that, Luffy shook his head. "Right, come on."

With several of her crewwomen following Luffy, and the others already helping their wounded as best they could – Chopper had brought out several bottles of pain-killers Hancock turned to her sisters, letting her normal haughty air disappear, for the most part, reaching forward gently touching them each on the cheek raising their heads towards her. "Sandersonia, Marigold. How are you both feeling?"

"Thankful for our 'curse' for once sister," Sandersonia spoke for them both conscious of the need to speak for the nearby Kuja, who were unaware of the nature of Devil Fruits. As it added to their mystique among their fellow Kuja, that was a good thing, and it would carry over to other people they interacted with. Indeed, even though Devil Fruits were well known, few people had connected them to Boa's powers, thanks to the rumors about her somehow being cursed and the general reaction men and women had to her beauty.

Marigold stayed silent at first, grumbling and shooting glances towards Franky, the type of which Hancock couldn't quite figure out. When called out specifically, she shrugged. "I, er, well, I'm alright, sister. I can already feel my curse going to work on my various bruises. I'm sorer about how the zombies kept us under control and my own loss before that than anything else."

"Yes, I lost to that green-haired woman that didn't have a bounty poster," Sonia added. "She and the orange-haired one came out of nowhere. Before that, we were winning the fight handily, but that orange-haired one, the Cat Burglar, used dials in a way I have never seen before."

Boa hummed at that, nodding. Dial Combat was known to the Kuja, but it would be interesting to see what kind of abilities this crew had with the odd devices. "Interesting, and good to know but I was serious. We are at peace with the Straw Hats. So, play nice with them."

With that, Hancock moved over to join Luffy, leaving her sisters behind before they could question her on why she was wearing a shirt that looked so similar to their opponent. Looking at one another, they shrugged and followed after their older sister.

When Hancock came close, Luffy was speaking to Marriage Proposal Lola, a New World pirate with a minimal bounty Hancock remembered seeing several months back. As she closed, Lola was answering a question that Luffy had asked her.

"...we've been hiding on this island for a long while, for some of us. The record is old man Spoil, who kept watch on the cemetery, although he's missing now. He could blend in with the zombies better than anyone else, so it was an obvious place to put him. My crew and I, or those of us who didn't die in the fighting against the zombies, have only been here for four months, but because I was the strongest of the survivors, I became the leader." Lola shrugged. "I was able to keep us all alive from that point on, and we took in the survivors of two non-

pirate crews as we just kept on surviving, hoping that someday someone would come along and be able to beat Moria.”

She clapped her hands and stared down at where her shadow was, its shape growing stronger as the sun started to burn through the heavy cloud cover of the Florian Triangle. That was a sure sign the massive ship had lost one of its anchor lines and was now being pulled out of the Florian Triangle by the current.

Not that anyone cared about this at the moment. Indeed, Lola and the others were ecstatic at the idea of seeing the sun again, and Lola danced a truly horrible-looking jig as she stared down at her shadow. “And then you came out of nowhere, and I just had to place our hopes on you, and look, it worked! Please marry me!”

“Nope. That ain’t gonna change no matter how often you ask Lola...” Again, Luffy was interrupted as something shifted. A large segment of the island just at the edge of sight to one side disappeared, sloughing away into the moat’s water, and that water rose, so much so it was now lapping at the top of the pier and becoming higher.

“CRAP!” Nami shouted from nearby, having just returned at a run with a small bag of gold over her shoulder, as Zoro trudged after her, holding a series of bags larger than he was tall on his back, a scowl on his face. “Oh my god, that was so weird. But Luffy, there’s a lot of good stuff back there, so we need to speed this up. No way am I letting any of this gold go to the bottom!”

She shot this out in rapid-fire, no evidence of her earlier concussion visible and was about to turn when she paused, having heard both what Lola had said and her name. Interrupting herself, Nami smiled widely at the other woman. “Are you Lola?! Oh my god, your shadow was such a help to Marguerite and me. If not for her, that ass Absalom would’ve married us, or kissed us. Not certain which would have been worse.”

Then she did something that shocked Luffy so much his jaw went slack, as did the nearby Franky’s. Even Robin came out of her trance from using the Web of Eyes, her normal eyes as wide as dinner plates as they watched Nami pull the bag of gold and jewelry off her shoulder and thrust it into Lola’s hands. “Anyway, here, have this!”

Lola stumbled and would have fallen if not for two of her followers caught her. “Er... thank you? Heh, I always kind of did like how my zombie-self acted. Pity she couldn’t have gotten her man in the end, though.”

Watching as Nami laughed and nodded at the woman she had just given gold to, Luffy slowly shook his head in shock, while Franky murmured, “Oh my god, is the sky falling?”

Luffy snorted at that but couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment. But the treasure in Lola’s hands reminded Luffy of a possible problem. “Crap. Sanji head down into the kitchen.

Prepare drinks for our crew, and make sure Chopper and injured girls get some. They'll need the energy. After that..."

"Make mine alcoholic," Zoro interrupted as he passed, the mountain of bags he was carrying filled with gold and jewels from Moria's accumulated wealth. The Shichibukai had gathered quite a lot of stuff over the years he had been using the Florian Triangle as a base of operations.

Snorting, Sanji made a rude gesture, but his own mind had raced ahead at Luffy's words. "Right, Luffy. I'll also check over our supplies. With this many mouths to feed..."

When Luffy nodded grimly, Sanji moved quickly, dodging between the next few wounded being moved down to the med-bay. This group was the first of the Survivors Alliance members who had been wounded in this conflict, but there were only a few more wounded who couldn't look after themselves, so Luffy supposed that was progress.

"Crap," Marigold muttered, looking around for a few specific Kuja. "Marguerite, Aphelandra. Go down into the kitchen and offer the Straw Hats' cook what help you can. We need to husband their supplies."

Both Kuja nodded, although they whispered to one another as they went, confusion plain on their faces. "I thought men couldn't cook? Only grill meat over an open fire or something."

"Silly! Of course, they can cook. Or else men would never have been able to go to sea. No, it's just they make really good field rations."

Chuckling quietly at that, Luffy looked over at Boa, who explained. "Sonia is my navigator, and Mari is my supply officer."

Both her sisters choked at the use of their shorter, more informal names to a man, but Luffy didn't notice, simply stating, "Then Nami's going to want to talk to Sonia later."

Robin came up to him then, shaking her head. "I found no sign of anyone else living out there, but I can't spread my powers everywhere around the island. There might be people still alive somewhere in the ruined forest. You and the other combatants truly did a number on the poof foliage," she quipped before becoming serious. "However, I saw cracks appearing in the ground throughout the island, and the water level is rising everywhere."

"She's right, Luffy! We've got about five minutes before the ship really starts to sink," Franky called.

"All aboard!" Luffy bellowed, his words punctuated a moment later by a portion of the mast-keep crashing down into the staircase leading up to the mast-keep from the docks. This

sent stone flying everywhere, but Luffy and Hancock sent out Rankyaku-style attacks to shatter the rocks heading towards them or the ship.

However, one that Hancock let through to crash into the water to the side of the pier where the Everlasting Resolve was moored. This caused a wave of water that washed over several people on the docks, including Luffy.

Boa blinked, staring in shock at the redhead standing where Luffy, the man who had so impressed her in various ways, had been standing a moment ago. “Wh, what...”

“GAAA!!” was the general cry of the people around the now annoyed and thoroughly soaked redhead. The Risky Brothers had fainted, many of the Kuja had slumped where they were standing, ignoring the fact the water was now well above their knees and getting worse, the plank almost in danger of floating away.

Grumbling, Luffy glared at Boa. “Damn it! I’d almost made it, almost made it through this whole Triple Shichi adventure without being transformed. And because you were feeling lazy, it’s ruined!”

“Wh, Lazy!? How dare you, you... gah, you speak like him but what is this!?” Hancock stammered, all her normal poise and control disappearing.

“It’s a Devil Fruit thing,” Luffy muttered before giving Hancock and the others watching the same excuse he had been giving for years. “And I’d appreciate you lot keeping it a secret. And by ‘appreciate,’ I mean it’s a damn order!” the redhead snarled, causing many of the nearby Kuja and Survivors Alliance members to flinch.

Boa scowled throughout this tale. As an emitter-type Devil Fruit user, she understood the power she wielded, its strengths and weaknesses. While a Devil Fruit could certainly be out there that could change someone’s gender, doing so with a splash of water? And continued to occur so long after the fact? No, that sounded like magic to her, like something from the stories old Old Nyon told them when they were young, before they went to sea and were taken as slaves.

And yet, it seemed as if Luffy believed it, so Hancock decided to set it aside for now. *There is a mystery here, but one that is small and unimportant in the face of other matters.*

“Robin, organize this mess however you can. Just get everyone aboard!” Luffy ordered, grabbing two nearby people and tossing them aboard the ship before following them. “I need to go get Zoro and Nami.”

Once more male and dry, Luffy flew out a moment later, zooming across the sky in his lightning form.

With Robin directing things, the mad scramble onto the *Everlasting Resolve* started to get organized even while the ship quivered and quaked around them, and unfortunately, there were just far too many people. Most Kuja were put in the gun deck, while others were put in Nami's room. Laki and Makino's rooms were turned over to some of the wounded men among the Survivor's Alliance since they would not be moving from the med bay anytime soon.

As officers and extremely touchy people, Hancock and her two sisters were given special treatment. They were put into the captain's quarters, which they would share with Robin and Nami when she returned. Luffy, Franky, whose room had also been taken over by more of the Survivor's alliance, and the other boys had also lost their rooms but would be put up in the crow's nest.

This all freed half of the *Everlasting Resolve*'s deck, which was undoubtedly a good thing considering how much trouble having people underfoot could be at sea. But getting the people aboard the ship was tough by this point, as the ship started to crack and sink all around them.

As this happened, Franky slapped his forehead. "Damn it! I forgot, the outer hull!"

"What?" Robin asked quickly as she saw a streak of yellow coming towards them, faster than a normal Soru user but not as fast as Luffy could have moved.

"The outer hull," Franky explained hastily as a still-protesting but haggard-looking Nami and a bruised Zoro were dumped onto the deck, loosely tied bags of gold bullion and several large crosses spilling across the deck. "The outer hull's not just the outer wall, but the bottom of the moat, the moat we're still sailing on. When the ship really starts to break up, that hull's going to start to come up, taking us with it or something worse. Even someone as super as me can't predict what's going to..."

Luffy was already moving as Franky paused, staring as a portion of the island went sideways. A crack like the world's ending was heard, and a huge geyser of water erupted, doing further damage and causing the ship to rock under them. "Turn the ship around. I'll be in the engine room! You and Nami will get us out of this, Franky!"

Franky nodded, racing up to the bridge where he could use the wheel with Nami right behind him. A moment later, Luffy was in the engine room, connecting himself into the engine, his electrical power lighting up the light bulb-like glass globes and the turbines they were connected to.

As they were using electricity instead of the coal system, there was no sign of the ship powering up except for a loud thrumming noise that reverberated throughout the ship, dying down to a barely discernable background noise a second later. Meanwhile, Franky was already in motion, his hands flashing over the ship's controls, while Nami took the wheel.

With a speed and adroitness that would have been impossible for any other vessel, Franky used the jet dials on the ship's outer hull to push them away from the docks before turning the ship around almost like a top pointing in the right direction he wanted, directly away from the center of the island and towards the outer wall/edge of the ship.

"Charge the railgun!" Nami ordered as she took over, steering the ship in the direction Franky pointed via the main power and the rudder.

Hearing that, Robin opened the small hatch leading into the railgun's turret. Moments later, several of the Kuja and Alliance members on the deck had to duck away as the railgun, which had been pointed directly up to provide more space, swung down. As it did, the cannon twirled around, pointing dead ahead of the ship's course.

Behind them, much of the mast keep simply disappeared, swallowed by the gigantic crack in the outer hull they had heard moments ago. At the same time, portions of the outer hull under the moat and ahead of them appeared as that segment of the hull rose out of the water. It was almost like a wooden wall had appeared loomed above them for a second even as the water under them started to sluice away, the portion of the outer hull under the ship also starting to tip up and dumping the water behind the ship.

"Fire!!" Franky shouted, and the railgun did so instantly. The small round, only about the same size as Nami's hand clenched into a fist, blasted out, and when it hit the wood in front of them...

"HOLY SHITTT! What is that!?" Lola screamed in shock, nor was she the only one to stare as the wall just disintegrated ahead of them. It wasn't like it had been struck by a cannonball or even an artillery shell. The railgun conveyed so much power at the point of impact that wood several hundred yards in every direction was turned to splinters no bigger than a finger. This let in more water to replace what had previously been lost and cleared the way ahead of the ship.

Acceleration, Hancock realized, her eyes wide. Luffy uses his powers to, to accelerate something like that. Like a normal Finger Bomb only taken to an insane level and with a larger round. Amazing! He could certainly work on creating larger attacks, but I think his control is magnificent already. Too often, logia users forget that kind of thing. Hancock didn't realize that she was chuckling quietly, as her sisters stared at her and then back to the action ahead of them, as the ship continued on its way.

"Full speed ahead!" Nami shouted into the copper pipe that would carry her orders down to the engine room or elsewhere on the ship.

At that, Luffy put even more energy into the engine, sending them forward at a speed no vessel on the five seas could match. The wind of their speed sent all bar Hancock and her sisters stumbling around the main deck. But a second later, the ship was free and clear out into the open waters beyond Thriller Bark.

"I'm bringing us about, slowly. Robin, keep an eye on the debris," Nami ordered as Robin, seeing the need for the gun was over, joined them in the bridge. Nami was all business now, her earlier beli-madness having passed. Unfortunately, this was replaced by her beginning to throb with agony. Her concentration on the gold had not gotten rid of her concussion symptoms; it only made her forget about them.

"Roger that," Robin said, even as two hands appeared around Nami's head, gently massaging her forehead and temples. "And when we are safe, Nami-chan, you will lay down and rest, yes? You can put off counting our new wealth until you're feeling better."

At that touch, Nami practically whimpered in relief, and Franky also made a note to get her down to Chopper the instant they could, sharing a grim nod with Robin. Concussions were no joke, even with Chopper's medicine.

Soon, the ship was sailing away from the sinking *Thriller Bark*, just enough to be away from its death but close enough to see it as the huge ship went down. This also brought the ship out of the Florian Triangle and into the light of evening, something that caused a ragged cheer from Lola and her followers.

Chuckling weakly, Nami checked the current and was satisfied. She locked the wheel in place, shouting out the open door. "Release the anchors."

Zoro, who had returned to the deck a moment before, nodded and moved to both the aft and prow, releasing the twin anchors of the ship once more. Several seconds later, the ship rode at anchor, gently bobbing in the waves as *Thriller Bark* sank behind them along the edge of the Florian Triangle.

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During all of this hectic excitement, Sanji had entered the kitchen, where he barely noticed the ship moving, looking around his domain with a stern gaze. He was pleased to note that it hadn't been entirely ransacked by the zombies after taking the ship. All of his utensils, cooking equipment and so forth had been left in place. *That's good at least, but I wager they took all the spices...* A moment later, this was proven. Only the salt had been left from his seasoning rack, and many of the herbs he kept up in the kitchen were also gone. "Dammit!"

"What's the matter?" a dulcet voice sounded out from behind him, and Sanji stiffened. Up to this point, he kept his urges in check with all the lovely women around, reminding himself constantly that they were why Makino and Laki-chwan were so badly injured. But now that the emergency was over...

Turning, Sanji found himself facing two of the Kuja. One of them was the blonde woman called Marguerite, who had just arrived with Boa Hancock, while the other one was a very tall

woman who had to duck her head to get through the hatchway leading into the kitchen. And both of them were also very good-looking.

One was an extremely tall woman, standing twice as tall as Sanji. Despite that, her face was almost childlike, dominated by dark brown eyes and long orange-brown hair falling past her shoulders. She also wore a blue corset bordered and blue bikini bottom. Over her shoulders, she wore what looked like a marine officer's coat, perhaps a trophy? Regardless she was intensely cute and crouching down as she had to in the kitchen, Sanji could stare right down her cleavage or at her bikini bottoms easily.

The second was the blond that the invisibility bastard had tried to marry. Her hair was short, paired with long slender legs and a curvaceous figure that was, though it pained Sanji to admit, a bit better than Nami's. This was on display because, much to Sanji's joy, like all the other Kuja, she wore a revealing bikini top and miniskirt made out of animal skin. The amount of cleavage this showed off was amazing, as were her long legs.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, ladies," Sanji said, trying to rein in his Mellorine tendencies, but feeling it building up in his system as he bowed, a faint drip of blood starting from his nose.

Both Kuja appeared confused at the bow, but the blonde pointed to herself and then her companion, introducing her as Aphelandra. "We're some of the better cooks aboard our ship. And if you have that stereotype that all women can cook, tell me now so I can punch you," she finished brusquely. "Or let Hebihime-sama know so she can turn you into stone like you deserve."

"So, what are we working with?" Aphelandra asked, looking around at all the interesting equipment available here. "And what is that large square thing?"

"That is a fridge, where we normally store things that need to be kept cold. Unfortunately, it's mostly empty, thanks to the zombies. What else could be here, I have yet to discern." Sanji tried to speak formally but his control finally broke.

Sanji's one visible eye changed into a heart, and he danced around them. "But don't worry yourselves ladies, I am the cook aboard the ship, and it will be my delight, no, my **dream** to cook to for such lovely ladies such as yourself and your other companions!"

"We can't just leave it to you," Marguerite demurred, stepping back a pace at Sanji's exuberance. "Not only will you be cooking for our crew, but Hebihime-sama ordered us to help. I'm afraid you're stuck with us."

Aphelandra leaned down, whispering into Marguerite's ear, "How did his eye turn into a heart like that? Is that something that men can do?"

“I don’t know, I’ve seen it before, but normally only when men look at Hebihime-sama,” Marguerite replied, “although, I will admit that the last man I saw with eyes like that was the one who was trying to push the ginger-haired girl and me into that strange ceremony marriage thing. If his lips go all longish like an anteater’s, be ready to run.”

“Ahh, you wound me, ladies!” At that comparison, Sanji regained some control of himself as he moved towards the spiral staircase leading down the supply room. Although a better term would be a larder since this supply room was only for food. The cannonballs, musket balls, gunpowder, and the supplies needed for the ship were kept in Franky and Laki’s workroom or in the gun deck itself. “I would never force myself on a lady like that. You’ll be pleased to note Marguerite that he fell to his death into the ocean when the island started to sink.”

Marguerite shrugged unconcerned, doing interesting things to her chest, which Sanji noted but very carefully tried not to react outwardly to even as he internally let loose a wolf whistle. Meanwhile, Aphelandra stared at the spiral staircase leading down and then at her body before sighing, shaking her head. “This isn’t going to be fun.”

With that, she crouched down and bunched her shoulders, barely able to fit her head underneath the lintel of the hatchway as they entered the supply room. But what the three found there made none of them happy.

“Let me guess,” Marguerite crossed her arms as she looked around at the shelves. Shelves that were mostly empty. “This was all full or close to it when you reached Thriller Bark?”

Sanji didn’t answer at first, instead moving over to a specific corner of the room and pulling down a box there. Within, he found what he sought and sighed in relief, pulling out a cigarette box. He almost reverently took out a cigarette, lighting it up immediately before taking a long drag. “Ahh...”

“Yuck,” Aphelandra stared, shaking her head. “I hope you don’t cook while smoking! Hebihime-sama found one of the older Kuja doing that and turned her to stone for a week. The smoke messes with the flavor.”

“That is only if you are not skilled enough to keep it from doing so,” Sanji said haughtily, while inwardly he cried at the censorious looks on both women’s faces. “B, but let us see what we can find. We have at least one large haunch of venison... that should be good...”

His voice trailing off, Sanji began moving around the room, taking stock of the room as the two women did the same. Thankfully, many of the canned goods remained canned meat, beans, soup stocks, some other things of that nature, along with all the flour that the crew had aboard beforehand. Several bags of dried prunes, apples and jerky along with several hanging fish, their sides salted and cured.

Sanji noted it all, then checked the lock on the door before coming back to the one haunch of fresh meat. "Perhaps plates of meatballs and spicy sauces, yes, that will work. I'd wanted to use it in a series of stews and steaks, but with this many people, that's impossible."

Marguerite looked at the meat, back to Sanji. "That's it?" she asked incredulously. "You think that one piece of meat will feed nearly a hundred and fifty people?"

"I do not think it will, Marguerite-chan, I know it." He then smiled cheerily at them, hefting the meat off the shelf and asking politely if the two women could grab some of the other small boxes and one specific jar that had apparently been left behind after being opened. That meant it would go bad within a day, so it was best to use it now.

Moments later, the two women were staring in shock at Sanji, who had pulled out two cleavers and then, faster than they could follow, transformed the venison from a haunch of venison to a mound of minced meat. The entire thing, bones and all. "How, how but bones, they..." Aphelandra stammered.

"Bones can be eaten in the right manner. If you chop it fine enough, it can be an added bit of texture. And it isn't as if we have enough food to spare," Sanji replied.

Marguerite shook her head. "Okay, but if you think I'll let you feed something with even tiny bits of bone in it to Hebihime-sama I..."

At her glare, Sanji picked up a tiny bit of the meat and bone onto one of the cleavers. Sanji separated the meat into two smaller piles and drizzled a few herbs and a single spice into the meat before working them into meatballs. With that done, Sanji placed the two meatballs into an already sizzling pan, where he worked the meat for a bit, continually stirring the pan. Soon the smell of garlic and meat rose. At that point, Sanji used a brush to lather the meatballs with the sauce from the jar.

A moment later, he set the meatballs on a plate in front of the ladies. "If you would like to try them?"

Both of them stared from Sanji to the meal and then hesitantly used forks to pick them up, biting into them a moment later.

Both Kuja were leery as they chewed, fearing they would find bone. But Sanji's work had chopped the bones so fine that they were more like a very fine powder mixed into the meat. And instead of bothering them, it simply added a kind of texture to the meatball. And then there was the taste, which was amazing. "It's both sweet and spicy at the same time! How is that possible? It's like someone took a pepper, then rolled it in some kind of jelly!" Aphelandra exclaimed.

Marguerite finished her meatball quickly, then clasped her hands in front of her, leaning forward as she grinned. "I never knew men could cook this well! You must teach me your secrets!"

"I, I won't teach you all my secrets, w, what kind of chef would I be if I did that," Sanji stammered, before he lost it completely, dancing around the two Kuja, "but if you wish to learn from me ladies, then I will cheerfully teach you two the ways of the culinary arts! Mellorine, Mellorine! All I would ask is you keep smiling when in the kitchen!" *And around me!*

The two Kuja looked at him, then at one another and began to laugh, which only made Sanji even happier as they agreed.

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"Well done, everyone! That was a little exciting there," Luffy announced, appearing within the bridge in a burst of light. He looked at Nami, then scooped her up into his arms, exchanging a firm nod with Franky. "Franky, you have the bridge. Get Hancock in here and her sisters. We need to figure out what to do from now on."

"I have the bridge, aye," Franky smirked.

"Ah, Luffy, put Nami in our room. I felt that putting her, myself and the Gorgon Sisters in there was the best way to give us privacy," Robin interrupted.

"...I had kinda hoped our room wouldn't be subjected to the crowding for various reasons, but I guess we all gotta make sacrifices." The look accompanying those words caused Robin to flush slightly before internally cursing their current crowded conditions for an entirely new reason as she watched Luffy take Nami below.

Franky snickered as he moved to the hatch leading to the ladder leading down to the deck, until four arms appeared on his chest, reaching down to clutch at his man-bits. "Did you have something to say, Franky?"

"Nope, nothing!" he squeaked, and a moment later, the hands disappeared, much to his relief.

Soon, Nami was abed. Sanji brought out a meal that, while basic, was still extremely tasty, somehow able to hand out a single plate of the 'mixed meatballs' to everyone able to eat by themselves. Drinks also were passed around, but unfortunately for Zoro, most of it was nonalcoholic. However, Zoro, Franky and Sanji were allowed to break out some sake as they sat up in the sitting area above the kitchen. Below, several of the other Kuja, including the two who had helped Sanji in the kitchen, ate at the main table. But given the crowded straits on the ship, they were all in the sitting area was easily the best place for this meeting.

Boa and her two sisters sat – or rather stood for the two younger sisters – to one side, while Lola and another survivor sat to one side of her. The man was a former first mate from a merchant ship and was the best Lola could come up with in terms of another officer. None of the survivors had any skill in cooking or medicine, which meant that they were all baggage in a very real way, but Luffy wasn't going to put it that way. Not after Brook had explained how much help the survivors had been in freeing Chopper and Franky.

“Chopper, start us off,” Luffy ordered from where he, Robin and the other sat in a series of sofas and small fluffy chairs facing the others.

The doctor was currently in his small form, the better to get through the crowd below, and he sighed wearily. “All of the wounded are out of danger for now. Blue Fan, Cosmos, a Survivors Association member named Alex, Laki and Makino are still the worst injured. But thankfully, they seem to all be responding well to treatment, and Robin was a major help earlier with the blood transfusion. Laki's going to survive...” Chopper chuckled, looking very weary. “I, honestly, I was most worried about her. But the rest were in a bad way too, especially Blue Fan.”

“Damn it, why is it always Makino, huh?” Luffy grumbled before asking Chopper about the rest of the survivors and the walking wounded.

“They're alright for now. Setting bones, putting on bandages and such is easy enough. But we're going to be out of anti-inflammatory, antibacterial and pain pills by morning. In fact, we're almost out of nearly everything bar some of the medicine specifically for burns. I have a lot of equipment, but the artificial lung is working to help Blue Fan, and the drips are being used for Laki and Cosmos. So, while we will be... okay, we will need to fill up our medical stocks entirely on the next island.”

“I think you've done a great job, Chopper! If you were a human, I'd marry you in a heartbeat!” Lola announced, giving a thumbs up. “In fact, all of you, someone, marry me!”

“Even me?” Robin quipped, causing Lola to blanch and the Kuja to burst out in laughter. That sound carried down into the kitchen, where the Kuja who heard it looked up and then smiled. Hebihime-sama seemed to be in a good mood, despite the day's disastrous events.

Deciding that was a great place to move on, Luffy looked over at Sanji, although he still smiled at Robin's quip, which had halted any further need to respond to the Mad Marry-er.

“Food will be an issue, Luffy,” Sanji admitted, taking a long, delirious drag on a cigarette. *Thank god I had spare packs! And if any of those survivor bastards look at them, I'm going to kick them so hard they'll land in Water 7!* The nicotine was helping Sanji with the pain of his injuries, even though Chopper had checked over his leg and burns before this.

“I’m good at making do with a little to go a long way, but there is a big difference between that and making something out of literally nothing. We had enough food to have fresh meals for two weeks at sea and stored and canned food for another three. But most of the fresh food was removed by the zombies who took us, prisoner, along with our treasure.”

All of that, they had gotten back and more. Indeed, Zoro was surprised at how much gold had already been moved onto the ship and wondered where it had come from. Still, he didn’t care much and hadn’t mentioned the state of the treasure room to anyone else just yet, so he didn’t interrupt Sanji now, even though a small part of him did want to shut the aho-cook up.

“Worse, we didn’t get any of that food back, leaving us with Nami’s mikan trees, our canned food and a few supplies I stored behind locks in the supply room they didn’t bother to break into. There are over fifty Kuja and a hundred and twenty-two refugees aboard the ship now.”

We’ll need to start fishing almost immediately. I wonder if I can do some kind of grenade-style fishing? Wait, no. That’s stupid. Lightning doesn’t work on saltwater like that. Or else there’d be a lot more dead fish floating around after a storm, Luffy grumbled to himself. Still perhaps some kind of pressure attack? I wish my mastery of Kenbunshoku was high enough to notice fish, but their minds are too damn small.

Luffy was about to tell Sanji to do his best, when he stiffened as a voice hissed into his and Robin’s ears from a mouth situated behind them on the back of the sofa they shared with Sanji. “Captain, it’s me, Eve. I can’t show up or do anything, there are too many people around, but I have to tell you something. We’ve got a stowaway.”

Luffy blinked, then gestured to Robin to talk. He really didn’t want to try and explain their spiritual crewmate right now, and hey, who knew when Eve might be an ace up their collective sleeve again?

Understanding what he wanted, Robin took up the conversation, speaking about their overall supply issues, bedding, blankets, and so forth, including and especially speaking about soap and the bathing area. But even as she spoke, Robin knew it was a waste of time. Hancock at least had noticed that Luffy had responded to something unseen and was watching him closely. *Although, is that why she is watching him closely? Hmm...* Pushing past her own somewhat muted attraction to the woman was hard – Hancock was not known as the most gorgeous woman in the world for no reason – but Robin had to wonder why Boa Hancock’s interest in her captain bothered her.

Unaware of his lover’s thoughts, Luffy tried to speak without moving his mouth, an odd feat that was much harder than it looked. After a few seconds, Luffy cursed his inability to have a poker face and raised his cup to his lips, hiding them for a second. “You’re not talking about

one of the alliance Amazon members, are you? Someone skiving off, not wanting to help the others.”

“No, Luffy! There’s this girl, I think her name is Perona, at least that’s what the zombies who were with her at first called her, hidden in the treasure room. She wanted to take over the ship, though I have no idea how Perona thought she would work it. Maybe she thought the zombies would come with her? Anyway, Perona started to load up the ship with some food. That’s where what little fresh food we’ve got comes from and a lot of the treasure. She’s got really pink hair and a kind of cool dressing sense,” Eve admitted before adding chirpily, “When you knock her out, can I have her clothing?”

“Now, now,” Luffy said with a smirk while the nearby Sanji, who was also listening to Eve, practically vibrated in place so high was his fury.

Although when he spoke, he was much better at keeping his mouth moving than Luffy, using the hand holding his cigarette to hide his mouth right away. “How dare you, we’re not going to attack some girl, regardless of our former antagonism! We are not, that is...” Sanji’s voice trailed off as Luffy looked at him, cocking an eyebrow, “Er, I refuse to countenance such an action.”

“Who are you talking to?” Hancock questioned harshly, interrupting Robin and Marigold’s conversation on if the Kuja or the survivors should get the first pick of the bedding. Obviously, it should be the Kuja, but that was for later. “You and the cook are speaking while hiding your lips, but I can see your eyes moving even if I cannot hear the words.”

Luffy sighed, then shrugged. *Screw it. I was always bad at lying and bluffing outside of a fight.* “We’re talking to our ship’s Klabautermann spirit. She’s a little different from normal ones and can speak to us all the time.”

“...What?” Hancock muttered, one delicate-seeming hand rising to touch her forehead, her anger disappearing, replaced by confusion. *This crew and this man have so many oddities I wonder if I will ever discover them all.* “Fine... setting aside that impossibility, it is incredibly rude to have another conversation going simultaneously like this, especially when we are talking about important matters.”

“Yesh, well, Eve had something she wanted to tell us.”

Sonia snorted at Luffy’s words. “Eve? Short for Everlasting, I suppose. That’s silly. And what could she know about that would be so important as to have you insult Hebihime-sama by talking to her as we’re trying to have a conversation?”

“The ship is the spirit, and the spirit the ship, so it had to be part of it, you know?” Luffy shrugged. “As for what she was saying, We’ve got a stowaway. Eve says her name’s Perona.”

He paused as Hancock snarled, and her two sisters hissed like they had just transformed into their Zoan forms. “Her!? That little traitor, she’s the one who used her hollow ghosts to keep our crew under control once they were captured!”

“I agree. As a follower of Moria, we would be fully within our rights as pirates to toss her overboard,” Marigold growled out, backing up Sonia as Hancock just nodded.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Zoro said from nearby, speaking up quickly. “I agree Perona was an enemy, but then so were you lot. It would be kind of hypo-whatever to turn around and not offer her a chance to at least surrender and work off her debt to us. Besides, Perona’s got a really interesting power.”

“As for debt, she’s why we have fresh food at all and a large chunk of the gold in our treasury. But power... you mean those ghost things, right?” Luffy questioned.

Zoro nodded, then told her about how he and Chopper had met the ghost princess. When asked for his opinion, Chopper was reluctant. “Well, she did treat me like I’m a giant teddy bear, which I didn’t like...”

He was interrupted by Hancock and her sisters all going, “You don’t?” in tones of both shock and dismay.

“Of course, I don’t!” Chopper barked back before calming down. “But she didn’t mistreat me beyond that, and she did help out Zoro to find Brook’s shadow and let me go free without a fight. If nothing else, she’s practical.”

Brook was up on the bridge, keeping an eye out with the help of some of the Kuja and survivors, although Brook was alone in the bridge. Only Straw Hats and the Kuja officers would be allowed in the bridge.

Boa scowled but could not gainsay that and nodded. “Very well, I can see that, but I will warn you that taking her in could be troublesome.”

“And I refuse to allow any woman to be tossed overboard. I want that understood,” Sanji announced firmly.

“As if our captain would do that, love cook,” Zoro scoffed. “What should we do, Luffy?”

“Well, for now, let’s capture her and then see how cooperative she is,” Luffy said with a smirk. “Eve, scare Perona out of wherever she’s hiding, and Robin, you capture her and bring her up here.”

OOOOOOO

Perona was not having fun. That was something of a minor understatement, as she was now frantically hiding, knowing that if she was spotted by the Kuja, they would kill her. To say nothing about the rest of the so-called Victim's Alliance. *The only group that probably won't kill me on sight is the Straw Hats. The only way I can see getting out without my face being rearranged in an un-cute manner is if **maybe** Zoro and maybe Chop-chan speak up for me. How lucky would I have to be for that to happen?*

Intellectually, Perona knew that most of these people had no defense against her Hollow powers. However, she had not forgotten that their captain had been able to somehow use her Hollows negativity. Nor was she of any opinion whatsoever that she could take on a Shichibukai like Boa Hancock. *To say nothing about Nico Robin. It would be a toss-up who would win, her with her limb summoning or me with my Hollows.*

She twitched as something touched her leg and turned around but found nothing. Perona's eyes narrowed for a moment staring into the darkness behind her for any hint of movement. *Please don't be a rat!* But after a moment seeing nothing, she shook her head and turned back to staring at the door to the treasure room where footsteps still resounded along the hallway. *I could take a hostage, then convince them I'm more trouble to fight right now with all their wounded. My Mini Hollows would be good for that. Heck, attack one to each of the wounded and boom, instant hostages. Heh, boom. They play nice or else...*

Or I could point out all the gold I had my cutey zombies bring aboard. That could put them in a good mood, right? I mean, technically, a lot of it's my back pay, but it would be better than getting electrocuted, turned to stone, poisoned, sliced or...

Perona was almost thankful for the feeling of something touching her foot again and whirled, glaring down at the deck behind her.

Again there was nothing there, and she slowly turned her attention to the sounds beyond the treasure room's door. Dimly she could hear sounds of cutlery being stacked or broken. Spending a year around Cindry-chan had made that noise very familiar to her. A few more moments passed of people moving around, and then finally, at least on this deck, quieted down.

Okay. Now... should I try to sneak out and get some food, or... no. It's better to stay hidden as possible and make my move for some food tonight. Blast it, with so many people I'll have to watch what I take carefully. They'll no doubt be watching how much food they take in carefully.

Again something touched her, her side this time. Perona whirled around even faster than before, certain she would find a rat or mouse.

She didn't. Instead, from out of the darkness, a shape like a hand barely visible from the light under the doorway was there by her side, phasing up out of the wood of the deck. And

then other hands were there reaching for her as a head appeared from the nearby bulkhead. "OOooooooo!!!"

The Ghost Princess screamed, pushing herself out from her hiding place, smashing several bags and a trunk full of treasure out of her way as she raced towards the doorway. Despite not hearing anyone moving around in the hall, Perona careened into somebody on the other side of the door, bowling her over, Perona's face crashing into the woman's chest.

Nami had gotten up from the bed in the captain's quarters where she had been put. Hoping to find Chopper and some more painkillers had moved toward the med-bay. No matter what anyone might insinuate, this had nothing about wanting to stop by the treasure room and look at all their accumulated wealth. Nothing at all.

For the second time since arriving at *Thriller Bark*, Nami found herself on the deck with someone on top of her. "What is with people knocking me to the deck today?" Nami scowled, glaring down at the pink-haired girl, who looked up from within her cleavage, the orange-haired girl's arms coming up to clamp around the shorter girl's body, pinning her own arms in place. "Now, what the hell were you doing in my treasure room, huh!?"

"You do seem to have been having a run of bad luck, Navigator-chan," Robin quipped from the stairs leading up to the conning tower. "And I believe it is our crew's treasure room, not your personal one. Or do we need to have a talk about the need to limit our greed again?"

Before Perona could try to escape, or Nami could reply, several hands appeared clamping around Perona and poking Nami in the side to let her release the shorter girl. As for you, Perona-san, I don't suppose I have to explain what will happen if you try to fight, yes?" Robin inquired, twitching the hands around Perona in various directions.

Perona shook her head, then slumped, all fight leaving her. After all, was nothing she could do now but take the inevitable beating coming and hope they didn't just kill her.

OOOOOOO

"I say we kill her," Marigold growled out. "She's the last of Moria's crew. She should pay like he did!"

"Agreed," growled several other voices, Ran and Sweat Pea chief among them. "She's the one that stopped us from breaking out the first time! If not for her, more of our crew would be in decent shape right now."

I knew it! Perona wailed internally, trying hard not to just start bawling in terror as she looked around at the officers of the three crews.

Or rather, most of the Straw Hats bar Brook and Chopper, both of whom were busy with other things. The other two 'crews,' calling the survivors a crew was doing the term a great disservice, were represented by their officers.

"You say that like we weren't just fighting you lot," Zoro drawled.

Nami nodded agreement glaring at the Kuja. "Yeah! My wounds, Laki's and most of Makino's were caused by you, not by her. Besides, she returned all our gold and with interest, so she's alright in my book."

Seeing this, Perona decided to speak up quickly. "I, I had no choice! I was just following orders! I mean, come on, would you believe your boss, the Pirate Empress, would lose against a rookie? It was the same for me!"

"Your hollow attacks messed us up a lot, though," Franky said slowly. "Although, I'm not so in favor of pummeling her into the ground for that. In a fight, sure, but after the fact like this wouldn't be super."

"There will be no talk of corporal punishment, it is not chivalrous, and we will not be doing it, not to a pretty lady!" Sanji agreed although it looked as if it physically pained him to disagree with the Kuja.

Thinking about it, Luffy hoped that being around the Kuja would chair Sanji of some of his thinking chivalry. For now, though, he agreed with his crew. *Although I note Robin ain't saying anything. Still, we'll ignore that for now.*

Looking over at Boa, he nodded, noticing that she too had been silent, seemingly because she hadn't seen Perona attacking her crew. "I think my crew is right. I'm not going to beat the girl because she followed her captain's orders so far after the fact. That sounds too much like torture."

"It's your ship, Luffy. My crew obviously won't like it, but so long as she is kept out of the way, or perhaps a few training sessions with one or two of them, that will serve," Hancock answered with a disdainful shrug. In her mind, this whole issue was a sideshow to the bigger ones: how their mixed crew would survive in such crowded conditions, and two,

"Yeah. And remember, Perona brought all that gold aboard. That's definitely a mark in her favor. Not like she's going to get any of that, of course, but..." Nami began.

"Hey!" Perona barked, leaping to her feet and getting in Nami's face, her courage fully restored now that she knew Boa Hancock and Straw Hat Luffy at least weren't going to kill her. "Would you like it if all that gold was on the bottom of the ocean!?"

“I’m sorry, what part about you being an enemy combatant did you miss?!” Nami ground back, getting into Perona’s face in turn, ignoring the blinding pain in the back of her head as she thrust her forehead against the shorter girls. “Our ship! Our rules!”

“I think that is more than fair,” Luffy said firmly.

Perona slumped, annoyed but resigned as the ship’s captain spoke up once more. Reminding herself of what was quickly becoming today’s catchphrase for her. *It’s better to have some gold and your life than all the gold and no life.* “Fine. I am literally in no position to argue.”

Luffy nodded to Robin, who released the many hands around Perona. “Good. In that case, you’ll work like the rest of us around the ship for now, and when we get to an island, we’ll decide if you’ve paid off your debt to us then.”

Now freed, Perona surprisingly made no move to leave the small sitting area instead of moving to sit against the outer bulkhead. When Luffy looked at her, she shrugged. “I’m not stupid enough to want to interact with the rest of the people aboard this ship before they’re informed about why I’m being let free.”

Since that made sense to Luffy, he simply nodded and turned his attention to other matters. “Now, Franky, you were saying something?”

As Luffy looked away, Perona finished moving to the wall, coincidentally slumping against it next to Zoro. And for some reason, there was a tiny hint of a blush on her face. Robin noticed that, as did Nami. They looked at one another, eyebrows raised in interest before Nami slumped back in her chair, raising one hand to block out the light from the evening’s sunset.

“Yeah, Luffy. We’re in a bad way for space as it is, and if any of Chopper’s patients return to being able to walk around, that’s not going to change. I built in redundant space for three or four more crewmen per personal room, and I can put in spare bulkheads into the existing rooms – my and Laki’s workshop has space for that already – to give some privacy, I guess, maybe even add in another shower area, that can maybe cut down on the issues there,” Franky said scratching his nose, forgetting for a moment that he had never replaced the glove-like covering on that hand, the noise reminding him as everyone else winced at the scrape of metal on metal.

“Er, anyway, I might be able to rig something up with all the flotsam from Thriller Bark. That ship had a lot of wood, metal and other stuff built into it. If I can make something about half the Everlasting Resolve, it would remove a lot of our crowding issues.”

Luffy nodded. “Do it. Start right away. I’ll help haul in stuff as much as possible, and we can organize some of the Kuja to help, right?”

“As this is for a very good cause, we can. Some of my crew, about a third or so, can use Geppo, enough to at least scout around so long as they can keep one another or the ship in sight. We might be able to add a bit more manpower to that operation. And our ability to move whatever raft your bosun can construct,” Hancock answered, standing up. “Wait a moment.”

She headed out onto the main deck, where she scowled, finding her way blocked by dozens of survivors. Now that the danger of the sinking *Thriller Bark* was passed, the sheer awe her beauty demanded came back, and all of them gaped at her in all in shock at her beauty. It was the normal reaction to Hancock, and yet, right now was not the time for it. “Out of my way, fools!”

Hearts in their eyes, the men in front of her instantly obeyed, and Hancock idly noticed that her own crew seemed to be more than willing to remain below decks to stay away from the men. *Is it just the Kuja aversion to men or how these particular men smell, I wonder?*

Snorting in humor at that and, Hancock strode to the starboard side of the ship to look out over the orange-tinged ocean, then pulled out a whistle of some kind from within the ruins of her dress under Luffy’s shirt, which, she realized with a start, she was still wearing. *Hmm, I wonder what my sisters think of my new fashion sense? I need to change that as soon as possible. I think that Nico Robin and I are close enough in the same size. I hope she has something appropriate for me to wear.*

Even as she thought about her wardrobe, Hancock had placed the snake-shaped whistle to her lips, blowing on it, although no sound that humans could hear came out.

Luffy had come out to watch her and cocked an eyebrow, wondering what she was doing. However, when two large serpentine heads poked out of the water nearby, he had his answer. Soon two massive serpents, around the size of the King Yagura Bulls back on Water 7, appeared, hissing in delight as they leaned down towards Boa, their reptilian faces scrunched up in pleasure.

With them came another, far smaller snake, who hissed and pressed up against the side of the *Everlasting Resolve*, slithering up its side as if it was a tree. Smiling slightly, Hancock scratched the two large snakes under their chins, then gestured, speaking in an ancient language for a few seconds.

This caused Robin, who, like the others had followed Hancock out onto the deck, to blink and lean forward with interest. “What Language is that?”

“It is the ancient snake-tongue of our ancestors. Since ancient times, we have been taught it to train our reptilian companions. It allows us to form a bond with our snakes and command them as you have seen,” Marigold declared proudly.

"I see. And where do you learn it?" Robin inquired, her historian's instincts coming to the fore.

"From the mouths of our elders and they from their elders," Sonia answered, shrugging. "How else?"

Robin didn't respond and watched with the others as the two large snakes obeyed Boa's gestures and commands. They moved away, swimming around the ship and dragging chunks of floating wood towards it. "Will that do?"

"It'll super do for a start," Franky nodded. "I'll want to build a small platform out from the side of the hull, around the port and aft of the ship. That'll do as a workspace since we're so crowded, and once that's done, we can start bringing in more material."

"Marigold, command the snakes. Tell Rindo and Sweat Pea, to work with Franky. Both of them know how to repair the ship so they should be able to help somehow. Sandersonia, you and I will work with Luffy and his first mate to bring in more material before night falls," Hancock ordered crisply.

"Right, as much as I want to hear this information you believe was worth my not stomping on you," Luffy teased, "this is more important."

He looked around then asked Robin to help bring up the tools. Given his size and how packed they were below deck, Luffy figured Robin would have an easier time getting supplies and tools out of Franky's room/workspace. He also rounded up a few of the nearby survivors. With Lola's help, he got them moving, using spare ropes to make makeshift grapnels and fishing nets to help hold the flotsam while Franky went to work.

As he finished, Luffy laid down the law on where the Kuja and the survivors could not go: the engine room and treasure rooms. Luffy was more than willing to give the survivors some money when they reached an island, but for now, it was best to keep the temptation away.

Staring out into the slowly darkening ocean, Zoro frowned for a moment then looked over at Perona. "Hey, how many of those ghosts can you see through at a time?"

Perona blinked, then nodded her head, crossing her arms and gesturing. Eighteen Negative Hollows appeared, spreading out from the ship. "This many. If it gets me some more space, I'm all for helping." Perona would have to sleep in with the Kuja at the moment, and given the angry looks being sent her way, it was obvious that was not going to be fun. "I'll find the stuff. You all drag it in."

With everyone helping who could, the mixed crews were able to bring in enough material to make the platform he needed to work with. But by that point, it was nighttime, the searches had to stop.

“Excellent work, everybody!” Luffy shouted, getting weary smiles from the Kuja and his crew who had helped in this bar Sanji, who had gone back inside to prepare some cool drinks for them all. “Franky, how long do you think it’ll take to make something?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” Franky admitted. “If you wanted a little dinghy, I can make one up within minutes. But a ship that can handle the grand line, even one that will only have to be towed by those super snakes or us? That will be a little tougher. Give me a day and a half.”

Luffy laughed at that, clapping Franky on the shoulder, knowing that it would take an entire crew of normal shipwrights to do something like that, and probably a lot longer under the conditions Franky would be working with. “All right, I won’t jog your elbow any longer. Thanks, Franky.”

Franky chuckled and thanked Sanji for the small plate of food he brought out for the shipwright. “It’s got lots of natural sugars and proteins, should help you stay up tonight.”

With a final round of thanks, Luffy and the others headed back into the kitchen and up to the sitting area. There they found Brook, released from his duty at the bridge for the evening. After all, the ship wasn’t going anywhere, and Nami had mentioned a moment before she didn’t think, “we’ll get hit with any typical Grand Line-ness before tomorrow morning, so why bother? Better to let everyone get some sleep, even the skeleton.”

Luffy looked at the musician as he sprawled out into one of the soft sofas. “So Brook, you have your shadow back, and my offer to become part of our crew is still open. But I haven’t heard a formal answer.”

Brook chuckled, then stood up from his chair, bowing grandly towards the captain, his violin out to one side as his afros scrapped the deck beneath them. “Then let me formally request that I be allowed to take you up on that offer, Captain Luffy. Why, if we had anything beyond my violin, I would cheerfully give you a song to celebrate the moment.”

“Meh, this isn’t the time for a party anyway,” Luffy waved his hand away. “After we remove some of the survivors onto the ship to the ship Franky’s building and maybe land a sea king, we’ll be able to celebrate. Zoro, I’ll want you nearby to help with any cutting he needs. Beyond that, fish,” Luffy shrugged. “We’re not going to go anywhere until that ship is finished anyway.”

“Yeah. There’s so many people up on our deck, we couldn’t even move to prepare for a storm, whatever type of propulsion we’re using at the time. And say what you will about this Florian triangle place, at least the majority of the normal grand line stuff doesn’t seem to happen around here, even on the edge we should be safe,” Nami predicted.

This caused Sonia to perk up, looking at her quizzically, but before she could say anything, Luffy turned his attention to the Gorgon Sisters. Hancock had sat down now in the

coils of the anaconda-sized snake as if it was a throne, stroking its head gently, looking for all the world like an empress on her throne. Her sisters once more stood behind her, although Sanji had offered them chairs.

Boa's lips twitched into a wry smile as she looked back at Luffy and nearby. Robin's eyes narrowed, a sudden suspicion going through her. *Whatever did occur between Luffy and Hancock while they were fighting? There seems to be too much understanding and good-natured humor between them, considering we were at one another's throats this very day.*

"So, Boa, talk. Start from the beginning. How did the World Government set not one or two, but three Shichibukai against us?" Luffy's own expression twisted into a smirk. "Especially considering one of 'em was you, and you aren't exactly known as a great believer in following the Wee Gee's directions."

"That's an understatement of large proportions, but very well, I will explain. My normal hunting grounds are quite far from here, and at the time, my crew was actually on our way home from a raid when we spotted a Marine warship. It was flying a personal ensign and was moving to intercept us..."

From there, Hancock went through her recruitment into this scheme from beginning to end: how she had been approached by Tsuru with Hina in tow. She detailed how much information they'd supplied about Ranma, and how it was Tsuru who had organized it, putting the pieces in motion before even the Water 7 debacle.

That caused Luffy and Sanji to wince, as Sanji wilted into a blubbering mass, muttering, "I see that the most beautiful rose among the marines has traitorous thorns."

For his part, Luffy simply gritted his teeth. *Dammit, I knew you would hand them over every bit of information you had about my crew and me but helping to set this up, Hina? That's just flipping harsh! I'd be willing to let giving your higher-ups info on me slide. But giving it out to three Shichibukai and then siccing them on my crew?! We got lucky here, really lucky that this adventure didn't end with me losing crewmen. I'm not going to forget that anytime soon. If the Wee Gee were worried about me before, let's see how they like it when I go looking for trouble!*

"Given how much information Captain Hina gathered, we thought we were ready for you, me and Kuma at least. I don't believe Moira actually read the files for himself, although he listened to us when we relayed some of it. Yet in none of her information could we find anything about your Goro Goro no Mi powers," Hancock snorted. "It seems even one of the marine's more intelligent officers neglected to spot that."

"I'd be a poor pirate if I didn't keep one ace up my sleeve," Luffy quipped.

"And that is a tremendously large ace," Hancock drawled with a snicker. "Heh, I don't suppose anyone saw it coming, certainly not my former associates."

Boa's tone caused both of her sisters to blink, looking down at her then at one another. Robin too caught the double entendre there, but since it seemed that both Hancock and Luffy were unaware of it, she let it go.

Instead, she concentrated on the issue at hand. "What I don't get is why. I would have assumed that the Wee Gee would be looking to calm things down between us."

Nami nodded agreement while Sanji danced around them, shouting, "I agree with the ladies! If you take away the Water 7 incidents, which was completely the marine's own fault for picking a fight with us, we haven't exactly gone out of our way to make trouble. Why would they personally set the beautiful Hancock-sama and those other two schlubs against us like this?"

"And given what I did to Croc, they had to know there was at least the possibility that one or more of you would die," Luffy added, shaking his head. "I would have been less surprised if they had sent another Buster Call fleet after us rather than court more damage to one of the three so-called Pillars of Peace." Luffy had heard that phrase from Garp when he was younger and ranted about the Wee Gee behind closed doors.

"They are terrified," Hancock answered simply, causing all of the Straw Hats to stare at her. "Oh, they're not scared of your crew per se, but you see, but there is a certain **event** coming up, and they were concerned that you, Luffy, who has already proven to be highly unpredictable, would interfere in it."

She waited a moment before going on. "There is a new Shichibukai, Marshall D. Teach. He goes by the appellation of Blackbeard."

Luffy's eyes widened as his heart began to pound in his chest. "That bastard!? What...no..."

"You know the name?" Hancock blinked in surprise as the others turned to look at Luffy too, while Robin bit her lip.

"Former Whitebeard pirate. Teach killed a comrade, a division commander, for the Devil Fruit they had discovered that day. He then escaped, and fire fist Ace, my brother, went after the murderer."

"Yes. And it is capturing Ace that won Blackbeard his Shichibukai status. Since then, the Wee Gee has put forth plans to use his execution to bring Whitebeard to battle on their terms, execute him, and, they hope, remove the strongest of the Yonko."

Luffy grunted as if he had been struck as his suspicion was confirmed, and his hands shifted into lightning, the heat of it gouging the wood underneath his fingers. "Okay, that's bad."

And they're afraid that the moment I hear about it, I will do something... **precipitous**," he practically hissed the word, "which they're right about."

"Tsuru said you are unpredictable and too adaptable, which makes you dangerous. Something I fully agree with now seeing after facing you in a fight," Hancock acknowledged ruefully. "Yet now, I imagine that worry has become a self-filling prophecy."

"Yeah," Luffy said with a slow nod, straining against both his anger and the desire to call on the Soul of Ice to control his emotions, "it does."

"And it also shows you precisely what the world governments thinks, if there was ever any doubt," Sanji snorted. "If you fly the Jolly Roger, they'll deal with you like are the scum of the earth no matter what they can actually attribute to you."

"This coming from slavers, tyrants, and bastards who I wouldn't piss on if they were on fire," Luffy growled, his teeth bared as his entire form began to flicker with lightning, causing all the others to retreat away from him quickly as he started to lose control of his anger.

"Hear, hear!" Hancock laughed, completely unconcerned about Luffy's show of force or his anger. "Indeed, I would rather toss more fuel on the fire if it was a Tenryubito."

"The question now is what we should do about it," Robin said softly, the question bringing Luffy back down to earth as her hand touched his thigh under the small tea table. "It does no good rage and rant Luffy. We need to figure out how best to free Ace."

"And how best to respond to this," Zoro said stonily, speaking up for the first time. The others looked at him, and he shrugged his shoulders, gesturing to Boa. "Three Shichibukai for one rookie. That's an act of war. And, you killed two of them, Luffy. That's going to elicit a response too."

"Perhaps, but not a fast one. The world government won't expect to hear back from us for another five days, as they had only a vague estimate about when you would go through the Florian Triangle. That will hopefully let you put my crew and the rabble ashore," Hancock stated callously.

This brought Luffy back to earth from dreams of flying out to the nearest marine base and immolating the place. He breathed in and out for a moment, pushing thoughts about Ace and what he might be going through to one side, concentrating on the here and now as Hancock went on.

"What happens at that point is up in the air, as I honestly don't know yet what I will tell them about this debacle. Certainly, I cannot tell them about how we are currently working together or anything like that. Thankfully, only certain Den Den Mushi can be traced to their specific points of origin, so we should have time to break away."

While the rest of the Straw Hats present frowned at that, Luffy crossed his arms, staring at Hancock thoughtfully. "Actually, I'd say that you owe us for letting you aboard at all. I think not telling them about my powers at least would be a good way to pay us back."

Boa snorted pointing at him dramatically, although it wasn't her full, patented haughty stance. "That again? You know it as well as I that leaving us behind never occurred to you, Luffy. If you must bluff, do so in a believable manner. No, if you want me to not tell them about your Goro Goro no Mi powers, then you need to be able to offer something more than simple transportation."

"Why?" Robin questioned bluntly. "You are not known as someone who really cares about the World Government's opinion about you. Admittedly needing our help to escape does not do your crew much credit, but as to retreating when Moria attempted to take advantage of things..."

That caused Hancock to glare at her for real, yet for some reason on Boa's face the expression looked both beautiful and terrible at once, so much so, everyone but her own sisters there nearly swooned. But Robin continued to stare back even as a slight flush came to her features. Luffy too looked back at Boa, frowning. "Yeah, Robin's got a point..."

"I... agree. She does," Hancock said to her sister's complete shock. But looking at Luffy, they decided it was because Luffy was indeed a logia user, and had already beaten two Shichibukai, and this was his ship. They could stand by their guns, so to speak, but they really weren't in a position of strength, here.

"But it is not one you will like. If it comes out, I helped you at all, my position as Shichibukai could well come to an end. That position is too important for me to simply set aside. Or would you like to explain to me how I could keep my position as warlord if it came to it that I agreed to with a parlay with you and then told you the precise thing most likely to turn you entirely against World Government?" Hancock snapped.

"What does the Shichibukai status protect you from?" Nami asked, confused. "I've never thought of it like that."

"Not Hancock-nee-sama," Sandersonia interjected, wishing to take some of the burden off her prideful sister. "Amazon Lily, our home island is protected by Nee-sama's status. If it is taken away, we lose that defense, and we're too close in the Calm Belt to Marineford and the Holy Land, Mary Geoise."

Nami frowned, still not getting it, but Robin did. "You fear exploitation of some kind?"

"Exactly," Hancock agreed, saying nothing more though she saw that Luffy understood what type of exploitation she was most concerned about. The Kuja of Amazon Lily were highly prized as slaves among the Tenryubito.

Luffy asked, his tone conciliatory but firm. "So, what will you tell them? Do you think that simply telling them the truth, will let you keep in the Wee Gee's good graces when we figure out a way to free Ace, or just start looking for trouble? Because we will. The Wee Gee declared war on us, and I'm gonna respond somehow to that. I just don't see you being able to keep your status at that point."

Boa grimaced. "Perhaps. But that is only a possibility. If I try to lie for you or otherwise help you, that will become a certainty." *Perhaps coming clean to Sengoku personally with the knowledge of Luffy's power will let me remain a Shichibukai. It is a slim hope, but it is the only way available to me.* That thought hurt for many reasons, and one, Hancock was surprised to find, was because she didn't want to betray Luffy like that.

Staring at Boa, Luffy saw the grim set of her jaw, the stern look in her eyes and sighed. "Alright, let's leave this for now. Not like we could do anything but spin our mental wheels on the whole saving Ace thing anyway."

"Agreed. The Kuja alone wouldn't be as much of a problem in terms of space. But we need to unload them first and survive to do it," Robin interjected.

Luffy nodded. "Robin's right and Franky says we need to give him at least a full day. If we can bring in a few fish a day, how far can you stretch our supplies, Sanji?"

"Not far," Sanji said promptly. "There are too many mouths for our supplies boss, and Chopper's already approached me about feeding the Moria survivors more food to help them recover from long-term exhaustion and other ailments. Chopper told me some of them are close to having scurvy. But there we have Nami-chwan's mikan trees."

While Nami stewed lightly at the very idea of using her precious mikans in large quantities like that, Marigold spoke up, grateful the subject had moved to more immediate and less fraught matters. "There are certain floating seaweeds that we might be able to find in calm patches of the Grand Line like the Florian Triangle that can give us a source of fiber and iron. I would suggest we try to find some and then make certain that small doctor of yours understands our priorities. If he can keep the wounded or sick alive but cannot guarantee they can help the rest of us at the moment, then that is the minimum effort he can put into them. Keeping the rest of us going is the priority."

"Do you know how far the next islands from Water 7 are?" Nami asked.

It was Sandersonia who answered this time, nodding her head, just as eager as her sister to follow up on the change of subject. "There's only a few islands where your Log Pose can take you from Water 7, and the most likely is a place called Mermaid Island."

Luffy's eyes widened at that. "The entrance to the New World! Ace talked about it once, as did Shanks."

Confused at the mention of one of the Yonko, Sandersonia still nodded. "Right. You won't reach there directly, however. As you follow the Log Pose's course, you'll note that the arrow will start point downward. When it points almost directly downwards, you'll need to head at a ninety-degree angle away from it at that moment in the direction away from the Red Line until you find yourself at the Shabondy Archipelago. It's a series of islands made of giant floating trees. You need to go there to have your ship coated in a special substance that will create a bubble around the ship, which will let you sink into the ocean and then move through the ocean to Mermaid Island."

Nami's eyes lit up, and she and Sandersonia began talking about wind, currents, and several other things that went over most of the listeners' heads. Luffy let them do it for a time, leaning back against the sofa and staring at the deck above them once more trying to shelve his anger and need to act on the information Hancock had shared. They just couldn't do anything about it right now. Not yet.

Oh, but when we do, I will bring the lightning down on you all! Including you, Gramps! No way you didn't know this was happening, and you didn't even give me a clue that my brother was being set up for execution!? If you let this go through, you are fucking dead to me!

Seeing Ranma's blue eyes deepen to cobalt, Robin knew he was furious, but before she could say anything, Luffy's somewhat murderous thoughts were interrupted by another source, as Hancock also decided to leave the two navigators to their own side discussion. With the serious discussion done with for now, this seemed to be the time to try and get to the bottom of a mystery. "And now that we have a plan going forward, there is something else you must speak about. Your curse, Luffy. I want to see it in action again. That does not match anything I've ever heard of from devil fruits, and as a paramecia emitter type myself, I know that for a fact."

Internally, Luffy sweatdropped at that, but he just shrugged since he didn't have any better explanation (or a more believable one anyway). "That story is what I was told about why I have my curse. If something else happened when I was a baby, I sure don't know about it."

'But if you want to see his curse in action,' Robin began, picking up a cup of water, a giggle coming from her lips. *This is precisely what Ranma needs to get his mind off Ace and the future in general.* Nor was she the only one to think that as Nami also picked up a glass of water.

"Gah, oh no you..." before Luffy could move, he was attacked from several different directions by water. Nami, Robin, and even Sanji had gotten into the act.

The now quite-wet redhead glared at them all, her fingers twitching. "Just for that, Sanji, I will be extra hard on you in our next sparring section. I hope you like the taste of saltwater."

Sanji seemed to think about it for a moment, then took a long drag of his cigarette as he stared at his gender-cursed captain, noting how the wet shirt and pants clung to her figure, which, while not beautiful, was still a treat for the eyes. "Worth it."

Marigold growled, whispering, "We're going to have to warn the girls about him, aren't we?"

"I doubt it. I think the cook is the harmless pervert-type, sister," Hancock said aloud, leaning forward to stare at Sanji, cocking her head coquettishly. "You wouldn't dream of doing more than gazing at us from afar, would you?"

"Of course not, Hebihime-sama!" Sanji shouted, standing up and dancing around them for a few moments until Hancock was tired of it and asked him to sit down or go and get them a teapot and a pitcher of water.

The cook took it as an order, and after sending him away once more, Hancock and her sisters took turns first to change Ranma, watching the curse in action. Watching the tall Luffy becoming a short, gangly but well-built woman was fascinating. "This is just amazing. And rather funny. But you said the only thing that changes internally is your taste buds? You can stay in this form without consequences?"

"Well, mentally, yeah," Luffy answered. "But my female form's fully er... workable. So, if the time I spend in my female form adds up to a month, I'll have to deal with the monthly monster."

"Oh, I like that," Marigold chortled. "I wonder if we could find a way to transfer this curse to other people? The whole world would be a much better place if men could experience that."

Soon though, head began to nod all around, and the interest in Luffy's curse began to fade, and Luffy decided to wrap up the evening. "I think we're done talking for the night. Let's all get some shut-eye, okay? It's been a long day and not everyone here can run on cola. Although I envy you girls."

"Oh, why would that be, Luffy?" Hancock questioned, cocking her head to one side. "You don't strike me as the sort who needs his own bed to have a good night's sleep."

"Heh, no, None of that. But you all are sleeping in the captain's quarters, and it's soundproofed. How much ya want ta bet that most of the Survivors at least, to say nothing of your crew, snores?"

Boa and her sisters exchanged startled glances, and then she nodded slowly. "Yes, in that case, your envy is fully justified. I know at least Sweat Pea and one or two others snore enough to wake Captain Kidd from his watery grave." Then to the shock of her sisters, she

smiled widely at Luffy and threw her hair over her shoulder as she turned away. "Have fun with that, Luffy."

"GRRRrrrrr..." Luffy muttered, but before he could think of an appropriate response, the others began to move, with Nami being the first to leave, surprisingly helped down the stairs by Sandersonia. The two of them still talking quietly about navigation and weather patterns and Luffy smiled. Oddly enough, it looked as if Nami had made a friend. Hancock followed, along with Marigold, although Marigold had a very odd look on her face as she looked over at her older sister.

Robin did not follow them. She waved off Sanji when he made to take her glass, saying she and Ranma would clean up. Luffy just nodded, and the two of them worked quietly side by side to pick up the remains of the small meal and the drinks, depositing the plates and so forth there alongside several others, and Luffy was amused to note that one of the Kuja and two of the survivors where they are doing the cleanup. That was good, although the suspicious looks on all three of their faces amused him. Still, the three crews would either get along or wouldn't. There was nothing he could do about that.

He was about to tell Robin goodnight when she looked at him. Seeing she had his attention, Robin jerked her head slightly towards the hatch leading out onto the deck.

Luffy nodded slightly, and the two of them headed that way, finding that many of the men out on the deck had fallen asleep despite the continual pounding and banging the starboard aft. Zoro and Sanji were already up in the crow's nest, moving around with Brook, visible from within the crow's nest's circular structure thanks to the light within. Chopper, Luffy reflected, would probably be sleeping down with the wounded. *Or maybe in with the girls? Who knows?*

The two of them slowly made their way through the sleeping survivors and then towards the prow, where they still where Luffy stood on the forwardmost point, turning to look back at Robin. "Are you okay? After all, you spent most of this adventure a rather fetching stone statue," he quipped, his joke falling a little flat to Luffy's ears. "No, er, lasting effects or anything?"

"Other than the fact that Hancock is still making me question my overall sexuality in a way that I had not thought I would with anyone other than yourself, no," Robin said dryly, making a joke out of that fact even as suspicions about Hancock and her interactions with her captain began to percolate in the archaeologist's head.

"That's good, and I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from that. I..."

An arm appeared on Luffy's chest, and a second later, a Busoshoku-clad fist flashed up into his chin. Luffy grunted at the impact and stumbled, looking at Robin in surprise.

“None of that,” Robin ordered firmly before stepping in, running her fingers up Luffy’s stomach, then down under his shirt, feeling the muscles there. This was one of her favorite pastimes. Robin delighted in the feel of Luffy’s musculature. She had never enjoyed large musclebound men, but men like Luffy, built for speed, with no added bulk but with sculpted bodies like that, oh yes. *And it carries over to his female form. I can’t forget that.* As a woman herself, she knew how hard it was to get that kind of muscle tone and appreciated the work most delightedly.

“None of that,” she murmured again, leaning against him for a moment, shivering as she felt Luffy’s hands fall to the small of her back and her hip, his fingers tracing the line of skin right below her shorts. “I am not some kind of wallflower or damsel in distress that you need to protect! I was a pirate long before you took to sea, Luffy. Do not forget that. I’ll admit that being turned into stone was not an experience I would like to repeat but it was not the end of the world. And it was my own fault for getting caught like that, not yours. Or do I need to remind you of the level of opposition we were facing at that time?”

“No,” Luffy said. Then he smirked. “But you’ll forgive me if I’ve got my own sense of what Sanji calls chivalry, you know? So if we’re fighting the same enemy, I assume it’s my fault if you get hurt, just like anyone else on the crew, but mainly you. You’ll probably have to smack me upside the head a lot to get that notion out of my head.”

“Then it’s lucky that I have hands to spare, isn’t it, Luffy?” Robin chuckled, shaking her head.

Luffy snorted and was about to lean down to give her a kiss when he became aware of nearby noises and cursed himself. *Dammit! I need to get better at keeping up my Kenbunshoku. Maybe that’s something I should do over the next few days?*

Turning in that direction, he saw one of the Risky Brothers and several other men up from the survivors’ alliance sitting nearby, staring at them from their makeshift beds. One of them even went, “Woohoo, romance, romance. No wonder our captain struck out with you so quick!”

Robin gestured, and several dozen hands appeared scattered around each man, ready to pull back at a moment’s notice. “I trust,” she said coldly, “that unpleasantness is not necessary to convince you to keep this to yourselves, gentlemen? It would be extremely bad for us if our relationship became common knowledge, and it would then become extremely bad for you. Do I make myself clear?”

All three of the men gaped, choked, and nodded quickly, while Luffy wondered how long it would be before their secret came out. Still, this was neither the time nor the place for romance, and he set aside a desire to kiss Robin (and a whole lot more), patted her on the back, and said simply, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Robin. Sleep tight, okay? And try not to hit Nami in the head.”

Robin nodded and, with all the poise available to her, walked past the gasping, still choking men. She didn't cancel the technique until she was in the conning tower and gently closed the door behind her.

Luffy watched, mesmerized by her hips swaying from side to side until they were out of sight. As the hatch clicked shut, Luffy shook his head before looking at the three now recovering men. "Let that be a lesson to you guys. One, private moments are supposed to be **private**. Walk away. And two, hell hath no fury than a woman."

"...I thought it was supposed to be 'a woman scored'," said the Risky Brother, the one with the strange thieves' mask on his head.

"No," Luffy shook his head. "Take it from me. It's just women, full stop."

OOOOOOO

The next day instantly proved awkward for everyone aboard the Everlasting Resolve due to the crowding. First of all, most of the men either in the crow's nest or out on the deck woke up first and in a very good mood. They'd all basically collapsed in exhaustion the night before but feeling the sun on them as it came up was an almost religious experience for many. Soon they were all dancing around, shouting in delight as they stared up at the sun or down at their shadows. "Yes, yes! The sun!"

"Oh, my word, that feels so good!"

"I want a tan!"

"My eyes are hurting staring at the sun, but you know what, I don't care!"

"Life, liberty and shadows! Woohooo!"

"I am never taking the sun for granted ever again!"

Luffy was a decent morning person, so long as he was the one who decided to wake up. If someone else got him up, he got a bit... aggressive. So, when the man who had talked about not taking the sun for granted shouted that in the middle of the crow's nest, he and the other people dancing around the male members of the Straw Hats suddenly found themselves hurled out into the open air as he shouted, "Take it outside you morons!"

Men screamed as they fell into the water all around the ship, and it was only then that Luffy remembered this lot weren't as tough as his own crew. "Oops."

Luckily, it seemed as if Nami's night's rest had done a nice job of letting her head heal from the concussion she'd suffered. So, when she emerged from the captain's quarters and the

shouts of jubilation and delight from the main deck made its way down to her, she didn't kill anyone.

The same could not be said for Boa Hancock. She'd actually had a good night's sleep too, but the overall condition of both her wardrobe and current circumstances was such that she was in something of a bad mood. She came up onto the deck, and the men around her all swooned as per normal, shouting out how gorgeous she looked in the light of dawn.

While that was quite poetic, it did not save the noise-makers from her wrath. "Mero Mero Beam!" she cried out, whirling like a top. The unconcentrated attack only impacted the actual people around her rather than the surroundings, but those people, many of them with hearts in their eyes and words of love on their lips, were turned to stone.

For a moment, the only sound around them was the continued work Franky was doing over the ship's side. His makeshift wharf was done, and he had begun to make a keel for the new ship. A flat-bottomed ship, the river-barge type which would have been far easier to make, would not survive the Grand Line for a day. Let alone a full trip of who knew how long.

Then Luffy landed nearby, smirking slightly at Boa, making her raise a hand to her hair for some reason and wish she had taken the time for a shower. "Hey, I realize they were noisy, but could you reverse that? Franky want some more hands than just our crews to build the ship he was planning for. We don't want the rest of 'em whining. Although..."

Luffy paused, staring at the statues as if an idea occurred to him, but Boa answered before he could follow up on it. "Hmph, very well. I will acquiesce to that, so long as Marriage Proposal tells them to keep it down in the morning."

"Seconded!" Nami barked from behind them, before asking to get by. The two who had been standing in front of the hatch leading into the ship moved out of her way and Nami, Marigold and Sandersonia followed with Nami mentioning that Robin had gone to help Chopper check on the wounded and make certain Perona was still in one piece and vice-versa with the Kuja she was currently sharing Makino's room with. The two navigators looked around, marking where the wind was coming, the amount of drag on the chains holding the ship still, and Nami breathed a sigh of relief. "Well, good news. We have about eight, maybe as much as ten hours of sunlight and no Grand Line... Grand Line-ness."

Everyone breathed a sight of relief, not wanting to deal with any kind of storm or bad weather with the deck so crowded. Chuckling at that, Nami went on. "Bad news, probably thanks to the Florian Triangle there's no current around here, and that means no fish near the surface. We might have some luck with that seaweed Hancock mentioned."

"That is Hebi-hime-sama to you," Hancock growled, her hands twitching as she glared at the orange-haired girl. She did nothing for now though, reining in her immediate response to such lese majesty because Luffy was there and she didn't want to start up trouble so soon into

their stay aboard his ship. Instead, she turned back to her previous victims, preparing to reverse her earlier attack.

“Wait!” Luffy said, reaching out to grab her forearm. Boa paused, but to the wide-eyed shock of her sisters didn’t protest the touch, simply looking at Luffy in question as he began to snicker. “Hehehe, I, uh, I just had an idea about how to help with the food situation...”

Robin got it first, and she began to giggle smacking her hip lightly against Luffy’s as she passed him by to look around the deck. “Well, we would have to ask Snake-san to unfreeze them anyway. In their current configuration they are not very stackable at present. That would help us with the space issue in turn.”

“Wait, wh...ooohhh!” Nami laughed, while Boa blinked, then began to get it, laughing as well in her normal haughty manner.

“Yeah. Wake ‘em up, have Hancock work her magic on ‘em to stand at attention, then turn say, half the able-bodied members of the Victims Association into stone. Then we can stack the lot of them like cordwood in the gun deck,” Luffy supplied an explanation, while Hancock nodded firmly.

“Hold on, what are you talking about!?! That’s my crew you’re thinking of subjecting to being turned to stone! And I don’t see the Amazons volunteering for similar

“Gah! Of course we would never even think of asking ladies to volunteer for that kind of thing!” Sanji barked, somewhat torn. While Lola was in no way a good-looking woman, she was still female, and as such he could not respond to that suggestion as it deserved.

Hancock stared at the woman, one eyebrow tilted sardonically. “The majority of my crew are wounded. Those that are not are far more able of body... and given how this lot woke us up, far more able of mind, than your followers. Further, my crew is only around a quarter the size of yours.”

Lola tried to argue back, as did several of the other Moria Victims Alliance members, including many of those who had been below decks, pushing their way out onto the main deck and arguing with the idea of being treated like cargo. Indeed, there were several pushing and shoving matches within the Victims Alliance, and more than a few confrontations between the men of the MVA and the Kuja as this possible solution made the rounds. All while Lola was shouting the very idea down, and Nami tried to keep the peace.

However, this argument collapsed thirty minutes later. Boa, freshly changed and now wearing the outfit Robin had when she first came aboard the Resolve, pouted at them. “Please, won’t you do it for me?”

To one side Lola stared in resigned, jealous dismay as her entire crew grew hearts out of their eyes and thrust their hands upwards shouting, "YES Ma'am!"

At that point, Franky hopped up onto the railing balancing there much like a large monkey would, roaring, "OY you lot! Quit standing around, we're burning daylight!"

"Right. Table this discussion for now. Nami, if you're feeling up to it, help Lola canvas her crew for carpenters and other people who have skills we can use now. Hancock, you know your crew. Let's get to work," Luffy ordered. He had watched the argument sharing a few clementines with Robin, Sanji and Zoro, enjoying the chaos, and knowing the decision really was his as captain but the fun was over for now.

The rest of the day, the crews were too busy to really cause friction. with the arguing done for now, Hancock split her crew in two, with Sandersonia and herself taking those well enough and able to use Geppo to head out and try and find the Floating Seaweed or bring back large bits of flotsam, with Perona using her ghosts to help. Luffy, Zoro and most of the survivors took turns helping Franky build the ship, occasionally needing to enlarge the makeshift wharf as they did.

Nami took the ship's small boat, a Waver by any other name, out and away from the noise of the construction to see if they could find any fish. Marigold went with her, and the two of them were quite frosty to one another, neither quite as willing to move past the previous conflict as Hancock and Luffy seemed to be.

Chopper and Robin watched over the wounded, particularly Makino and Laki, who woke up in the afternoon. Neither could move very much, but they were awake, and Laki could eat. Thanks to her broken jaw, Makino couldn't, but she could at least sip a smoothie Sanji made for her. The other wounded, particularly Cosmos, was also improving quickly under Chopper's care.

The showers and food still caused moments of friction and even conflict thanks to the sheer number of people aboard the ship. Kuja and survivors came to blows several times when they were called to eat, and the hallway leading to the showers became a battlefield later that morning. Chopper had to put his foot down at that point and did so by bellowing both crews into submission while standing over the unconscious forms of several Kuja who had thought that, as women, they should be allowed to take over the showers more than men who had been without soap for months. "Honestly, you morons, get a clue! You can wait to get clean until they're rid of lice and skin diseases!"

The bit about lice was enough and caused a spurt of fear in everyone. While Chopper oversaw the showering and washing of the wounded, that concern colored the rest of the day as Brook and Sanji, shattered leg and all, led cleaning efforts throughout the ship to make certain everyone from the Survivors Alliance both were washed, and the ship kept clean of any such issues. The only ones exempt from helping were the wounded themselves.

And later that night, fully half of the MVA volunteered to be turned to stone. Or, well, fell for Boa batting her eyelashes really. After that they were somewhat spoiled for choice. The individuals turned to stone were then stacked as Luffy had suggested in the gun deck. This relieved a lot of the crowding, although once the wounded from the Kuja and MVA were on their feet it might come back. And there were still issues occasionally, mostly around mealtimes, as work on Franky's ship continued.

And there was even some friction within what Nami called the "Temporary Women's Officer's Quarters." Ironically, one of those issues was caused by something returning to normal: that is, Robin moving from sleeping in the book nook back the bed she shared with Luffy. But Robin wasn't sharing her bed with the Master of Sleep-Fu any longer...

Nami grumbled, wincing and rubbing at the black eye Robin had given her. "It's bad enough that I have to sleep in someone else's bed, now I'm being abused too," she grumbled to Boa, not really noticing that she was talking to the Pirate Empress as if she was a friend, thanks to just how tired she was before she got her first cup of coffee. *Preferably Irish coffee today.*

"I thought that she was doing it on purpose until she actually woke up, when you poked her in the cheek," Hancock muttered, also touching her side. A knee had hit her hard there, waking her up from what had been a good night's sleep on a remarkably comfortable bed.

"I did say I was sorry," Robin said, holding a small toiletry bag in one hand as she followed the other two into the shower area. It was early, and all three of them wanted a shower before anyone else was up. It seemed as if their discussion on that score last night had proven accurate, and Robin turned the occupied sign to show that the area was in use by women.

"You're going to have to stop tossing and turning so much," Hancock said coldly, as she took a sliver of bar soap from Nami before turning on the water then stepping back. The water slowly began to heat and Hancock turned to the other women, undressing quickly.

For a moment, both Nami and Robin stared as Hancock stripped off her clothing. The Kuja Empress was very careful to keep her back facing the stall. She was far more willing to let someone look at her naked chest than the slave mark on her back.

Neither woman realized that was what she was doing however, too caught up in staring.

Robin was an attractive woman, and she was both older and more experienced than Nami. The Hana Hana no Mi user felt she was past the stage where she cared much about other women looked like. And yet, looking at Boa Hancock, Robin felt almost ugly in comparison.

Boa's legs were long, perfectly formed, well-muscled, and she had the same kind of six pack that Luffy had in his female form, except where Luffy had the figure of a tomboy and was striking rather than beautiful, Boa Hancock was, well, perfect. Distressingly so. Her thin,

extremely fit, waist gave way to large breasts, larger than Robin's own, but with even more firmness to them. She had a face that was both haughty and cold yet, also somehow inviting.

Still glaring at Robin, Hancock stepped back into the shower, closing the curtain.

At that point it was like a spell had been broken, and Nami muttered moving into her own stall. *Not a lesbian, not a lesbian, not interested in girls! If I was, I'd still be trying to get with Luffy, hell I'd have gotten with him before Robin did.* "How do you sleep with the captain anyway you toss and turn that much?" she asked, trying to get her mind off of Boa. *I have never thought a woman was attractive before! Sure, I can think they're cute or approve of the work they put in or scars but sexual feelings towards them is just gaahhh.*

"Luffy has this martial arts style that relies on him being asleep and somehow senses danger or attacks on him. The only time I actually hit him, was when I kicked Luffy off the side of the bed when he was semi-awake," Robin answered, stripping quickly and heading into her own stall.

In her case though, Robin was not questioning her sexuality. She knew she was bisexual, although her only experience in that direction was Luffy. Finding women attractive was not new to her. *Finding Boa Hancock attractive when I am concerned about how she occasionally looks at Luffy is another matter. Being attracted to a possible rival is not a good way to go about that rivalry.*

Boa frowned as she listened to this, although she wasn't certain why. Why it bothered her knowing that she and Luffy Robin shared a bed.

So, she put it out of her mind, and quickly finished with her shower, and dressed once more in a blouse and pair of jeans that Robin had loaned her. Neither quite fit Boa's style or body, but since her own wardrobe had gone to the bottom of the sea, Hancock wasn't holding her breath on getting anything that would. The jeans were a little too tight in the rear and a tiny bit too short, and the shirt so tight Hancock had to unbutton it to a dangerous degree. *Still, it's clean, that is all that matters right now.*

The other two women stepped out of the shower, and quickly began to change, in the open, not having a secret they had to hide as Hancock did. But as they were doing so, the door opened, and several of the Survivors Alliance tromped in, shouting to one another "A shower, a real honest to God shower. It might be the second day, man, but I'm still getting used to that.

"HAH! You were only on Thriller Bark for a month. Do you understand how long it's been for m....meeee..."

The voice of the speaker trailed off, as his friends piled into them, their own cheers of joy at the idea fading out quickly as they stared at the three women. Eyes bulged and blood

dripped out of their nostrils as Robin and Nami both shrieked in shock, the Devil Fruit user leaping back into the shower, forgetting her powers in her surprise.

Nami crouched down, wishing she had her weapon to hand. No prude she still didn't like getting walked in on like this. *I don't mind showing off, but on my terms damn it!* "Damn you all, that will be a million beli from each of you!"

But Hancock instantly clasped her hands together as she shouted out "Mellow-Mellow Beam!" The foursome in the doorway instantly turned to stone, and Hancock snarled, "I see that we will need to make that sign bigger, and perhaps assign times to women and men.

Nor was that the only such incident. Several of the Survivors Alliance members proved to have a death wish as Luffy woke up by being splashed by a bucket of cold seawater. The redhead spluttered and shot to her feet, giving the men a great view of her chest. Luffy had slept shirtless since a large number of the crew's spare clothing had been turned over to the Survivor's Alliance. "You assholes, I'm going to kill you slowly!"

Such incidents occurred throughout the day large and small. Several fights broke out among the Kuja and survivors, as they jostled for space both below decks and on the main deck. The cylindrical room that was the crow's nest of the *Everlasting Resolve* soon became a place of respite from the crowding occurring elsewhere, and statues began to accumulate, stacked at the prow of the ship as the others chose to follow Luffy's suggestion on that point.

On top of that, at one point Marguerite wanted to treat the Gorgon Sisters to their own, special meal. Sanji was, naturally, all for this, but when Luffy heard of it he put his foot down, and made Hancock do the same. There would be no special treatment for anyone, beyond giving the ladies their own room, IE the captain's quarters.

The two of them had a very genteel shouting match, twice removed from the ship as both of them used air walk. Neither wanted to restart the conflict between their crews. But eventually, Hancock agreed to go along with things. After all, there really wasn't all that much food to go around, regardless of Sanji's skills.

Sanji actually made the tension in the air slightly better. His over-the-top flirting and dancing around got on the nerves of the survivors certain, but the Kuja were actually amused by it. They didn't understand it, but they were amused by it, which was enough.

Brook also tried to do his part, singing little ditty's and ribald shanty songs to keep people spirits up.

However, as the day went on and the work continued on the makeshift ship, with everyone helping, Robin began to be aware that her initial impression of Boa's interest in her captain was accurate. Whenever they were around one another, Hancock became a little not

softer, but approachable, less stern and strict. She was still chilly, and aggressively dismissive but that was not quite the same thing.

Thankfully for everyone, Franky finished his spare ship right on time later that day. It was a small sloop, about a third the size of the Everlasting Resolve. It didn't have a mast, there having been no wood available for even a single mast, but it had a keel, a single deck underneath the main, and was seaworthy. That was enough, although Franky scoffed whenever anyone called it a ship.

The first time that happened the second morning after Thriller Bark sank, Franky pointed at the dramatically shouting out, "Hell no! That thing is not worthy of the label 'ship.' I barely was able to pull put a keel on it at all, it, it's barely a few rooms put together, and has no wheel or anything else! It's just an empty box."

"Nonetheless, it does have enough room to let some of our unwanted guests spread out, no?" Robin asked, glaring at the survivors who had walked in on the ladies that morning.

When Franky nodded, Luffy snickered, shaking his head and gesturing with a thumb towards the ship. "You heard the woman, Lola, spread out. Your wounded can stay aboard the Everlasting Resolve and we'll keep the rotation going to bring you aboard for meals and showers. But the rest of the time, you lot can stay over there. Do exercises, maybe read a few books if Robin and Nami want to loan you any, whatever. Just get out from under our feet so we can get going."

"Soon, please," Nami muttered, staring at the edge of the Florian Triangle and then around. "I think we've got another forty minutes before the Grand Line's largess runs out."

Soon, more than two-thirds of the Survivors Alliance had shifted to the barge, which was quickly tied to the two large snakes, who pulled it along behind the Everlasting Resolve. With that, there was finally enough space aboard the ship, and everyone Amazon, Survivor and Straw Hat alike, breathed sighs of relief. For Lola and the Survivors Alliance on the barge, there were hammocks, soap, and other cleaning supplies, which was good enough.

"So, how fast can we go?" Luffy asked looking over at Franky, while nearby Hancock completed giving orders to the snakes. They would follow along as best they could in the larger vessel's wake, while Nami and Sandersonia would try to keep the ships out of any weather pattern they could dodge at all.

"Slowly, boss," Frankie admitted with a wince. "I'd say about five knots." That was at least a sixth of their normal speed.

Looking up from his work, Sanji shook his head. "I'm really glad that we already started to cut down on our food intake then. But hopefully we'll get lucky once we start moving."

“That’s your job, Sanji.” Luffy said with a nod. “If anyone argues, boot them in the head.”

“Unless they are ladies, in which case, I’ll serenade them,” Sanji chuckled, sending a bow towards Nami and Makino, who was, astonishingly up and about today. She wasn’t looking too good but had written out that she was going stir crazy in the lady’s quarters.

Luffy rolled his eyes but didn’t say anything. *Meh, we’ll see how long that attitude lasts... crap, what if some of the Kuja actually like it!? NO!!! He can’t get positive reinforcement for that, can he? Ugh. All our hard work would be worthless then.*

The ships moved out, and not an hour later, Nami’s weather sense was proven bang on. Behind them a massive hurricane formed whirling around the edges of the Triangle out of sight from one end of the horizon to the other, followed by heavy, thick rainfall. This was followed by fighting through a massive current that was moving across their path, but there, the crews got some luck in that the current was populated by a large school of fish, small bass.

That night, Brook approached Luffy, and asked if they were going to have a party that night. “We have more room now after all, and food now, after all. I would truly enjoy playing for everyone.”

“Er... we’ll have a brief window of about an hour or so Brook,” Nami called from where she was standing with her head out the hatch to the bridge. “That’s about it before the cold front starts dumping snow on us.”

Already the air was getting a little cool, and Brook and Luffy both winced. The skeleton allowed the idea to pass but ten minutes later, the three cooks had prepared a heavy fish meal for everyone on both ships. Sanji and Luffy delivered large platters to the barge and returned to take part with the other mobile Straw Hats up on top of the crow’s nest. While the interior of the crow’s nest was being used by some of the survivors still, along with below decks, the area up here was quickly designated a ‘Straw Hats and Friends’ only place.

Not that this kept out all the Kuja, obviously. Marguerite, Hancock and her sisters, and one or two others had joined them the evening before. Even now, as Brook began to play a low song, Marguerite and Aphelandra were sitting extremely close to Sanji as he explained about some kind of cooking technique which both Kuja were taking notes on.

“Proof positive that it isn’t just with men who you can win through the stomach,” Luffy quipped to Robin, who chuckled leaning against him lightly. Furniture, even blankets, was at a premium of course, and getting any furniture up here in the first place would’ve been annoying.

But Hancock decided it was time to talk seriously about the future. “So, have you thought of any plans going forward?” she asked idly.

“Not really? Robin and have talked about it, and we’ve come up with a few plans to free Ace, but we need more information about Impel Down for most of them to work. That bubble coating thing though will be important regardless. Although I don’t know if I should be telling ya that since you’ll just pass it on along with information on my Goro Goro no Mi powers,” Luffy mock-growled.

Boa scowled, shaking her head. “I would like to help you. From what I know of Ace, he is a rare honorable pirate, and my own relationship with Whitebeard is neutral at worst. But I cannot let my Shichibukai status go. It defends Amazon Lily, which is something only that status can do...”

There was a scratching noise, and all of them turned to Makino, who was writing on her small pad of paper. She had been informed before this by Chopper and Luffy about the discussions they’d had on this point. And she had a suggestion.

When Chopper read it, his features and tone changed, almost matching Makino in furry, tiny form. “There is a solution, you know: find another patron. Another power whose name can protect Amazon Lily when added to your own. That is your primary concern about your Shichibukai status, yes? And the World Government is not the only power in the world.”

It was clear that Makino was thinking something, her mouth trying to twitch into a smile. But the damage to her jaw was such that actually hurt quite a bit.

Boa nodded but then waved the idea aside. “That would be ideal, but even Whitebeard would not take that chance. He and our Kuja elders did not always get along, shall we say? Personally, I have no issue with him but he would not be willing to use his name to defend our island.”

“Not even if you helped rescue Ace?” Chopper once more read out in Makino’s voice.

“Hah!” Hancock chortled. “Perhaps, but again, that is not a certain thing. And that assumes that you would be successful. Given your abilities Luffy, I could say you could possibly break into Impel Down if you could get to it, but getting Ace back out before reinforcements arrive? No.” She paused, biting her lip in a way that Robin instantly saw and which caused her eyebrow to twitch before she went on. “If it were just me, I would take the chance. But not for my Island’s sake.”

“You’re saying me again, when I asked about you helping Boa. What if you helped us? How much of a better chance would we have? And if we did succeed, Whitebeard would certainly be willing to let you use his name,” Chopper-Makino pushed.

Boa said nothing to that, for a few moments, then her eyes narrowed. “Not enough. But there is something else. Something that could give me a second means of ensuring Amazon Lily’s safety. “You have apparently wanted to be the Pirate King. And your strength is already

amazing, up there with King of the Beast Pirates, or Marco of Whitebeard's crew. Stronger than any Shichibukai bar Mihawk, and even that is debatable. If you use your name, as the upcoming Pirate King, then

"I... I need to think about that," Luffy muttered, while making a note that they had to contact Whitebeard once they had a plan of their own to get Ace free. Before that it wouldn't be necessary. "I, on the surface it seems a good idea, but being tied to defending Amazon Lily, it could put me in a rock and a hard place. It's the same reason why I didn't want Vivi tied to us back in Alabasta."

"Which is precisely what you are asking me to do," Hancock barked, not questioning the mention of a Vivi right now. She could get that story later.

"No, I think you're already there," Luffy interrupted, reaching out to actually touch Boa's shoulder, a sight that made both her sisters gasp. The fact she allowed it and even smiled faintly was not lost on them. "I'm not saying no, Boa. I just want to think about it. You wouldn't want me to just leap in without thinkin' would you?"

"I suppose not at that. But I will require an answer Luffy. Whitebeard's agreement alone is not enough to make me want to throw aside my Shichibukai status so utterly as to help you free Ace, or even lie for you. Not alone," Hancock said sternly, and Luffy nodded.

A few moments later, the nice weather passed and life on the Grand Line went on.

Of course, even with the lessening of the crowded conditions and the need to man the ship, there were still incidents.

Luffy looked down from where he and Zoro were fighting, as a scream reverberated from the ship. After all, with the main deck still too crowded most of the time, they could at least train in the air alongside the ship.

"That's a woman's scream, huh sounds of its rough around the edges maybe?" Luffy mused.

"Heh, I'll just nod so you can assume that I know what you're talking about. Not everyone is a connoisseur of screaming, you know?" Zoro grunted his new blade, Shusui, pushing hard against Luffy's Busoshoku-clad arms.

"Huh, how strange," Luffy quipped as six men boiled out from the latch leading into the conning tower. On their heels was Lola, who was wearing a towel. Just a towel.

"GAAAH!!!" both Straw Hats howled, turning away. "God, I so did not need to see that."

Below them, Lola shouted, "One of you will have to marry me, I don't care which!" as the rest of her crew shouted and scattered.

"Can we go back to hitting each other?" Zoro asked. "I want to remove this moment from my brain."

They were interrupted by Sandersonia and Hancock hopping up into the air alongside them. Twin grimaces on their faces. "If that's in the cards, I want to join in," Hancock announced bluntly.

To the shock of everyone in the Straw Hats crew, Sanji actually seemed to gather a sort of following among the Kuja as the days in motion continued. He put it down to his flirting. But once, watching this, Luffy repeated his earlier comment about hearts and stomachs being connected.

Zoro, Franky and Brook came to blows about Brook's early-morning ritual of using his music to wake people up. Luffy put his foot down on that, saying they would all wake up whenever, and then put Brook through a series of training exercises that had him exclaiming, "Yohohohoho it is a good thing that I have strong bones, or else I'd be keeling over. Ah, but I only have bones Yohohohoho!"

But mostly, Brook's music helped keep things calm. But sharing space in the crow's nest had the exact opposite effect. Several of the Survivors Alliance members **did** snore, and so did Franky and occasionally Zoro. The space was big enough for them all, but not for their personalities.

The same could be said for the former captain's quarters. Robin was quickly banished from the bed in the captain's quarters, with Nami sleeping between Laki, who had woken up twice since *Thriller Bark* sank and Makino. She, Lola and Marigold had several shouting arguments about the biggest, cushiest chair in the book nook, which Hancock ended by threatening to turn all of them into statues every night until they reached Shabondy. In turn, Hancock came under a united front from the Straw Hat girls about her giant snake companion staying with them, and Sandersonia and Chopper had a short fight begun when Sandersonia sleep-walked over to where he was sleeping in a hammock in the corner, took him, and returned to her own using him like a teddy.

The shout of "I am not a plushy!" went unheard by the rest of the crew but caused issues among the officers. And eventually, Chopper shifted to sleeping in a hammock in the sitting area above the kitchen. This proved to be a good thing occasionally, as he was there to help Robin, Brook or whoever else was on watch on the bridge at night.

And throughout those days, Robin continued to watch Hancock and Luffy's interactions, becoming more concerned. This came to a head on the fourth day aboard the ship.

In the early afternoon, Chopper, Luffy and Zoro were training alongside the ship after a storm. Nami and her assistant Sonya, who had fallen into that role within a day of boarding the ship and who was somewhat in awe of the younger woman's abilities, had predicted that there wasn't going to be any further issue with weather for the day, although it would become insanely hot quickly.

That of course was fine for most aboard the barge and the *Everlasting Resolve*. Most of the Survivors Alliance had yet to get used to the whole sun thing, and many of the Kuja, Makino and Nami, were out on the deck, ordering the men either to the barge or to the decks below so they could get in some sunning.

Brook was at the front of the ship, serenading several of the ladies, who were bobbing their heads to the music as the perverted skeleton routinely asked about panties between songs. But seeing as the Kuja didn't care, Nami refrained from killing him.

Because of all this, no one was around as Robin approached the three Gorgon sisters, who had taken over her little reading room for the day. Coming up the spiral staircase, she found them all there reading books, and smiled at that, fighting back a faint blush as Hancock looked up at her, forcing Robin to gird her proverbial loins and banish such thoughts away as she moved to sit across from the woman, stapling her fingers in front of her as she prepared to gather power just in case. "Can you tell me your intentions towards my Captain?"

Blinking, Hancock looked up from a book, an old fantasy novel Robin had found and treasured for decades. "What do you mean?" she questioned, while her sisters looked up from their own books.

"Your general attitude since coming aboard has not entirely matched the rumors about your general character. All those points have occurred when you are around Luffy," Robin elaborated.

"What are you implying?" Hancock shook her head, her eyes narrowing as she realized the other black-haired woman was trying to interrogate her for some reason.

"You're acting friendly towards Luffy, far more understanding than I would assume from someone with your reputation. I wish to know why. It does not match your attitude towards the majority of men aboard, or even the women most of the time. Outside of the mornings, when you are, admittedly, quite mellow, you treat all of us far more distantly than you treat Luffy. We are treated as temporary acquaintances, but you treat Luffy as if he is a friend or a possible romantic interest."

"Boa Hancock, the Pirate Empress, Queen of the Kuja and voted most beautiful woman in the world six years running, was flabbergasted. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped, staring at Robin as she stammered, "I, I don't, I... that is preposterous! I..."

“Sister, I don’t er... disagree with what Nico Robin is saying,” Marigold said, her normal differential manner toned down a bit. “Whenever you’re around men before, you always well, looked down on them, show that they are beneath you or worthless. And of course, you still do mostly!” she added hastily. “But you treat Luffy almost like you treat Silvers-san.”

Robin’s eyes also widened at that. *Silver-san? Silvers Rayleigh?! No, come back to that. Preferably when Laki is back to normal.*

“I... I believe that he is powerful, and that my loss to him isn’t so much a defeat as simply a learning experience...” Hancock began hesitantly.

“That doesn’t explain why you laugh at Straw Hat’s jokes, sister,” Sonja said, “Or why you went along with the idea of shipping the Survivors Alliance over to the barge rather than have our crew take it over. I realize it isn’t very seaworthy, but with some supplies and our Yuda Snakes we could have broken off then, used our Eternal Pose to head home through the Grand Line and Calm Belt. And you have even allowed him to get away with touching your hands and arms several times, and I am not talking about during spars!”

“Th, that is a false allegation! I merely calculated that our odds of getting home before starvation striking the crew was not worth the risk. I will...”

Before anyone could point out Hancock had not mentioned how she allowed Luffy to touch her, the man in question walked into the captain’s quarters. The loud noise interrupted the growing argument, and all four women craned their necks over the edge of the book nook, where they were greeted by the sight of Luffy opening up a set of drawers below, his thin muscle-t drenched with sweat, clinging to his body like a second skin.

As Nami had predicted, it was an insanely hot day out, and he had been training since this morning, on top of helping Frankie and some of the Survivors Alliance with some of the repair work needed on the barge after last night’s storm. He nodded up to the ladies in the book nook before grabbing several clean bits of clothing. Pausing just as he was about to exit, Luffy looked back up at the frozen tableau above. “Er... is everything okay?”

“Just a difference of opinion,” Robin answered simply, delightfully taking in the view. *By the Rio Poneglyph itself, I am very much looking forward to kicking out Hancock and the others! I swear he’s doing it on purpose!*

Actually, Luffy wasn’t. It was just that it was that freaking hot out and had been the past two days when it wasn’t raining cats and dogs. And since the ship was running out of practically every supply but treasure, he’d been forced to use muscle-Ts as often as possible.

Although honestly, Luffy could probably say the same about Robin personally. Like Nami and the Kuja, Robin had taken to going around in bikini tops and skirts, and while Luffy had

gotten used to seeing her in such clothing in the months since she joined the crew, it was still one heck of a treat for the eyes. To say nothing about the other women aboard.

Luffy was out the door a moment later, and Robin looked back at Boa, who had also been staring down at Luffy hungrily. Her sisters seemed to have liked the view too, but not nearly as much as Boa although now that it was over, she looked torn between delight at what she had seen and confusion at why she liked it at all. Shaking her head, Robin tossed off the impact of Luffy's choice of clothing, reaching out and pushing Boa's jaw back up into position. "You were saying?"

Smacking Robin's hand away, it took a moment for Hancock to come back to their previous conversation, and she seemed almost reluctant to Robin to admit it. Yet with a firm growl and a toss of her hair, Hancock did so. "I... all right, there is some attraction. Does your questioning have to do with your apparent relationship with him?"

Robin flinched bit, but she had gone into this conversation knowing that her relationship with Luffy had become an open secret so she nodded. "It does. But if you know about it, then I don't need to beat around the bush, do I? Shichibukai or not, I will not just allow you to try and woo my man!"

Boa did not react with the anger or condescension that Robin expected at that comment. Instead, she simply nodded her head, looking at her sisters then back to Boa. "I, I see. I thought as much. As for my own feelings..."

To Robin's utter astonishment, Boa Hancock blushed. She blushed like a maiden, blushed more than Vivi had before kissing Luffy that night before they left Alabasta. "I, I suppose that there is some truth to it beyond the physical."

She held up a hand as Robin made to speak, and seemed to breathe in several times, calming herself down with an effort of will that even now, Robin could only respect. "However, I do not believe you have thought this through entirely."

"I, what?" Robin asked, frowning now.

"Well, I.. that I am attracted to, Luffy is not enough." Robin frowned but Hancock went blithely on, although Robin noticed there was a faint flush to her face and her eyes were locked on Robin's forehead now. "Even if Luffy agrees with my idea about using his name to help defend Amazon Lily and it works, I will not be joining your crew, so it would be a mostly catch-as-catch-can long distance relationship. I would instead become, I suppose, the first captain of the new power, one who would operate on her own, rather than simply following you around, which would be rather demeaning frankly."

"Why do you think that?" Robin asked, some of her anger dissipating as she realized that Hancock was not interested in sticking around.

"I cannot, I refuse to leave my people. I will remain in the area around Amazon Lily in order to defend them from any enemy able to get through the Calm Belt and will see to our own issues. So Even if Luffy and I, with your consent, agree to act on these feelings that might be building between Luffy and I, I'm certainly not a threat to your position. Unlike you to those around you when you are sleeping, Nico Robin," Hancock answered, smirking slightly at Robin.

Robin frowned back at her, but then went over the interactions Luffy had woman since they had reached the Everlasting Resolve. There was a level of closeness there. It was not love, or anything like that. True, a few times Luffy Robin had caught Luffy looking at Hancock with interest, perhaps? Not just physically either, but something more, with respect mixed in there somewhere. Regardless, there was something building there, although Robin doubted Luffy had any idea it was there.

"And where exactly do I fit into this imagined closeness?" she growled.

"Alongside me," Hancock answered easily and now it was Robin's turn to blush. "I admit I don't feel any emotional attraction to you as I do Luffy, but you're certainly a fine figure of a woman. And considering that my... my only real romantic partners over the years have been women, I fail to see how that would be a problem."

Now it was Robin's turn to blush. She would be lying if she said she wasn't attracted to Hancock. Being with Luffy as she had been had opened her eyes to women as being sexually attractive. And yet, to have it just spouted out there was something she hadn't expected. But then something about the way Hancock spoke registered. *Only real romantic partners are women? And later, Sandersonia seemed to be astonished that Hancock allowed Luffy to touch her. And Hancock seemed to be astonished she was attracted to Luffy at all...*

She paused, thinking about that, thinking about her own past, and then said slowly, "In my own travels, occasionally, I have made decisions I would not otherwise wish to have made," she said obliquely. "Why do I get the impression from your tone of voice that your ability to choose your 'romantic partners' was taken from you at some point in your life?"

All three Gorgon sisters flinched, and Robin nodded slowly. "I see."

"You are far too observant for your own good," Hancock said coldly. "Has anyone told you that?"

"One could almost say that is my original sin, so to speak," Robin said, smiling without humor.

It was Boa's turn to slowly nod, understanding the point. "I am not going to share that secret with you. It is too personal. I refuse to open myself up like that when I have no need."

“Before you can once more make a leap of logic, yes, Robin, Luffy somehow discovered that... aspect of my past, although I do not know if he has made the full leap as you did.”

“I see,” Robin said slowly. “And being Luffy, he probably no doubt promised to keep your secrets and then immolate your enemies. That is the kind of thing he does.” *He did for me. And before me, Vivi.*

The word they were very carefully not saying was slavery, which was very much the case. All three siblings still had the tattoos of the Tenryubito on their bodies. If that got out, their reputation would be ruined, removing much of the mystique from the mystique of the Pirate Empress and the Kuja in general. Not only would that, but the Marines and world government, who answered to the Tenryubito, could well be ordered to drag them back into slavery.

A slavery that had been both horrible and very, very personal.

Boa shook herself, tried to banish the thoughts of what she been forced to do in their time as slave in an effort to protect her siblings. They had all been young, but even at eleven, Boa’s beauty had drawn gazes. And as slaves, far more than gazes. Her sisters could well have been killed or abused similarly but Hancock had brought down their master’s interest only to herself.

Since Fisher Tiger had freed them, no man had lived after touching her. No man had even come close to doing so, and certainly she had never found any man Hancock found attractive. But now that it had been thrust into her face, Hancock could not argue that Luffy interested her, both physically and emotionally. His sense of humor, his looks, his strength, his overall personality, all of it called to Boa, although she honestly had very little idea about what to do about it, and had no desire to leap into anything quickly.

Coming back to the here and now, Hancock opened her eyes and stared across at Robin. Instead of the condemnation, or worse the simpering sympathy she expected, all she saw in Robin’s eyes was understanding. Understanding and perhaps a bit of acquiescence.

“I, I need to talk to Luffy about this, this issue, but, but I will...” Robin clenched her teeth, “I will, if it comes to it, look the other way if your connection grows. So long as you truly are not going to join the crew. I don’t want to compete with you.”

Predominantly, Robin thought, because I would no doubt lose because of my own awakened sexuality towards the softer gender making me vulnerable to Hancock’s powers. And in a fight. Can’t forget that. I could perhaps beat Hancock if I took her by surprise but that would be a tall order.

“I agree,” Hancock said simply. “Although I have no idea how to go to about breaking the subject with Luffy. He seems rather...”

“Slow about emotional things, a bit perhaps, although he can surprise you. He certainly did me,” Robin chuckled in fond memory before shaking her head. “I think that I will wait do so until we are at the Archipelago. And he’s made a decision on the becoming a Yonko concept. That way this decision won’t impact that one, and we... or you two, can have some time to yourselves without other people around. I know for a fact that’s impossible at the moment on this ship.”

“Wait, what about your Klabautermann? Isn’t being alone just a dream aboard this ship at the best of times?” Hancock asked quizzically.

Robin chuckled at that but went with the subject change, feeling just as grateful about that as Hancock seemed.

However, Luffy surprised both Robin and Hancock the next morning, as the officers of the various groups and the Straw Hats came together once more in the second story of the kitchen minus Sanji, who was still cooking the third rotation’s breakfast, and Zoro and Chopper, who were on the bridge, all of them were there this morning, with Laki joining the others outside of the medical bay for the first time. She still looked pale, but was lucid at least.

“Alright, I thought about that idea about taking your island under my protection. If you agree to act as first captain pirate fleet, to come as I call, and to help me break Ace out of jail or whatever we do there, I am willing to go along with that idea. To have Amazon Lily be the first protected by my name and flag on my road to becoming the Pirate King” Luffy said firmly.

“Then we will need to do that formally,” Hancock said, smiling at him, before reaching out a hand. “We’ll need a formal writeup, and an exchange of sake, and vows but for now, I think for the two of us, and for those of us present, a simple handshake will do.”

Luffy laughed, flipping his hat off of his head, placing it to his chest as he stood up, holding out his other hand to Boa. “Here is my hand, and here is my oath. I agree to this alliance and will extend my protection to you and your people.”

“And I, Boa Hancock, Princess of the Kuja, do accept for myself and my people,” Hancock said firmly, clasping Luffy’s forearm tightly.

They stared into one another’s eyes for a few moments and Luffy backed away, still grinning, but Robin noticed with a bemused smile on her face a faint blush on his features. *Yes indeed, there is attraction there. I rather think Luffy has a type: tall, dark haired and independent. And strong too, I suppose, though I never took that to the extreme of fighting him directly. I really will need to talk to Luffy sometime soon.*

OOOOOOO

Garp frowned, turning to stare at a nearby wall, his arms crossed. "Er, did anyone else just feel a shiver up their spine?"

"I have no idea what that was, I thought it was you opening a window again," Sengoku grunted. "Close the damn window Garp!"

Shrugging, Garp moved over to close the window, still wondering where the shiver that had gone up their spines had come from.

OOOOOOO

As interesting or as annoying as the personal aspect of having so many people on the Everlasting Resolve was, the reality of the situation facing the three crews was worse. Thanks to the Kuja's large snakes, the barge was able to keep on course and stay with the Everlasting Resolve, but it was still battered by wind and wave quite a bit more than a real sloop would have been. To say nothing of the Grand Line specific issues: storms of hail or snow, days of scorching heat that sapped the will of everyone, whirlpools, and other, even stranger weather patterns.

And of course, there was the food issue. Which, on the fourth day of movement, was getting grim. "We're getting desperate for food, Captain," Sanji said, Marguerite leaning against the railing beside him as she nodded mournful agreement, looking at her Hebihime-sama. "We're down to one more half-ration meal for everyone, and we haven't added enough to our supplies to come back from that. We haven't seen any fish since the first day on the move, and there just doesn't seem to be any monsters willing to try and attack us around here."

Sanji took a long drag from his cigarette, sighing. Thanks to Laki not being allowed to smoke on orders of Chopper, Sanji had access to all the cigarettes, one resource they had in abundance. It was scant comfort given his inability to perform his duties adequately.

"The Survivors Alliance members are in a bad way too. We just don't have enough fruits and vegetables to go around. We're keeping the scurvy at bay, but many of them will start having issues soon," Chopper reported. "They just didn't have the strength and health they needed before coming aboard."

Luffy looked over at Boa, who in turn looked over to Sonia. "Is there any way you can tell us where we are in relation to the Shabondy Archipelago?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, Nee-sama, but you know there aren't any navigational aids like that in the Grand Line. You trust your log pose and that's it."

Luffy scowled, closing his eyes concentrating on his sensing technique. A moment later, he broke off frowning, staring down. "I'm not getting anything out there."

“We can only keep on going,” Lola said morosely. “Dammit, we should’ve thought of food instead of gold.”

Wincing, Nami glanced away. “If Makino was there, she probably would’ve thought of it,” she muttered, castigating herself.

“And, well, I suppose at least a portion of this problem is my own fault. I didn’t even think about the need for supplies, not even for myself,” Perona muttered from nearby. Her position on the ship was quite ambiguous, and she normally kept out of the way of everyone. But she had decided to join this discussion for some reason, probably the pinched, wan look of growing hunger on her face.

While Luffy could empathize with Perona on the food front, he knew that Nami and Perona’s emphasis on the gold had been misplaced obviously. Still, no one aboard had thought about the situation until it was too late. He said so and then smirked. “Although you know I’m going to be giving some of that gold to Lola and the others, right?”

Nami just sighed, agreeing but finding it hard to get the words out while Perona scowled but said nothing either.

Hearing this, Lola smiled. “Thank you ever so much! Wherever we go, that money will help tremendously. Honestly, your kindness is too much. Please marry me!”

“No thanks, I don’t think I want to be tied down to someone who entered Paradise from the New World and isn’t willing to return,” Luffy answered quickly.

Lola scowled and looked away as the Risky Brothers danced around her again, shouting out how that was a new record, “Turned down by the same man twenty times in a row! And each in a different way too!”

“Well, yeah, I try to be at least a little imaginative in my reasons for saying no,” Luffy laughed. “Although, I’d prefer if ya stop asking as I’m running out of material.” *Well, material that doesn’t mention her obsessive nature, looks, or her being weak, anyway.*

“Hah! That just means that you are running out of willpower to resist!” Lola shot back, throwing her arms in the air, causing laughter around them, although Boa’s eyebrow seemed to be twitching, and Robin wanted to change the subject quickly.

The rest of that day was spent simply conserving their energy as much as possible. No longer was Luffy willing to push his crew into training. Not that they didn’t get any exercise. This wasn’t the Grand Line, after all.

“Is it just me, or those monkeys screwing with us,” Luffy shouted as he launched the lightning bolts down towards the monkeys, for them to watch into the ocean, the top of which dissipated his attack. “This is the third attack they’ve launched at us today!”

“Shut up and keep trying! I want some monkey stew, dammit!” Hancock shouted, trying to use her powers nearby even as ice smacked into them from above.

Alas, there was no monkey stew that day. The monkeys retreated before they could be slain, diving deep into the sea to get away, and the sea itself was too choppy for even Sanji, Zoro or Franky to swim. And later that day, conditions became worse.

“Ice, why ice of all things!” Lola shivered in place as the rest of her alliance tried hard to stay warm. Life on the barge was even worse, with everyone hiding within, while the snakes had retreated below the waves before they could be overcome from torpor. The barge was currently lashed to the Everlasting Resolve via two thick hawsers. “This is making me miss the weather of the Florian Triangle!”

Truly the Grand Line had no mercy, the weather and ocean both trying to kill them every day.

“And now it’s whirlpools, again,” Nami muttered before barking out orders. The Everlasting Resolve slid to the side, then wove its way through the whirlpools, even as more appeared all around them, but the ship danced under her controls, and Luffy could almost feel Eve’s delight at the exercise. “I wonder what’s creating these specific ones, though?”

Yet despite the poor conditions of their supplies, the Everlasting Resolve was able to deal with everything thrown at it, just as it had before they hit the Florian Triangle.

Watching the ship dance under Nami’s directions and Luffy’s power, Franky bellowed laughter from where he was working the wheel. “Hell yes! This ship, this maneuverability, and our navigator. I’m going to do it! This ship that I built will be the one to conquer every ocean in the world!”

Even the dinghy that Frankie had built made it through well enough. The people on it, not so much. Thanks to how injured and sickly the survivors had been before coming aboard, most were decidedly not enjoying themselves. Even Lola and her crew, the strongest members of the alliance, were not in a good way by the morning of the fifth day.

However, on that morning, their fortunes finally turned for good.

Zoro was up in the crow’s nest where he was exercising. The rest of the people who slept up there were currently getting their breakfast ration. That amounted to a single cup of sake and some gruel at this point. Occasionally between reps with his specially made weights,

Zoro would look out over the ocean through the windows, and at one point, he paused, staring towards the horizon.

Below, in the bridge, Nami and Sandersonia were grumbling a bit. “Those darn whirlpools and that one current last night, it’s blown us well off course. I knew it would, but the odds of trying to find some fish in the current were too good to give up. But here we are, fishless, and the Log Pose is pointing well to our starboard.”

“And at an angle downward,” Sandersonia observed with a chuckle.

Nami acknowledged, her lips quirking wryly at another example of the Grand Line weirdness. The needle did tilt to point downward, but to Nami, that wasn’t as big a deal as the fact they had some work to make up before they could get back on course to Mermaid Island.”

Seeing her friend’s morose face, Sonia chuckled again, ignoring the grumbling from her stomach. “I still can’t believe you can accurately predict the weather on the Grand Line. I have lived all my life dealing with the Grand Line both here and in the New World, and I have never heard of someone who can do that as well as you. You don’t get it right all the time, but you do often enough to be amazing.”

Nami sighed, looking down at her gauntlet, which she wore all the time these days on the arm opposite the Log Pose. “Yeah, I guess. It’s just, well, I know I pull my weight on the ship, but not in the crew. Not in a fight.” Sonia made an interrogative noise, and Nami explained. “No matter how hard I train, I’m catching up to the rest, not in toughness, not in instincts. Heck, Marguerite just tackled me to the ground and beat me up in a straight-up brawl,” Nami grumbled, mock-glaring towards the blonde.

She’d actually come to like Marguerite. She was easily the best baker among the Kuja and got along quite well with Sanji. Indeed, Nami felt that there might be something going on between them the past few days. That, or Marguerite was just trying to soak up as much of Sanji’s cooking skills as she could by following him around everywhere outside their time in the kitchen. *Either or, I guess.*

“Hmm... you used dials, correct? You and that sharpshooter, Laki,” Sonia mused. Laki and Makino were still not 100%. They had both been beaten pretty badly, and the delay in getting medical attention had not helped. Regardless, Sonia remembered seeing Nami fight both with her devastating lightning attack, the mirage tempo that hid her and Makino’s approach, and the brawl that Marguerite had ended by knocking Nami out. Only to be knocked out in turn by Makino after the gun user had beaten Sonia.

“That’s right, have you run into them before?” Nami asked before looking over at where Brook was taking his position at the tiller and ordering new course correction. Behind them, the snake-pulled barge followed as they made their way in a new course, directly following the Log Pose once more.

“I’d heard rumors, but only rumors of the actual Sky Island, although I had seen several examples of dials,” Brook replied, shaking his head. “Mah, how romantic, an island in the sky populated by actual angels, each as beautiful as our Laki-san. It’s enough to make your heart pitter-patter. But of course, I don’t have a heart, Yohohohoho skull joke!”

“What island up there did you go to anyway?” Sonia asked quizzically. “You know there’s more than one Sky Island, right?”

“I know there’s two, but the way you’re talking implies there’s more than that.” The fact that Enel had come from another island had come out, while the Straw Hats were in Shandia and the tale of what he had done to the place: using his power to burn the entire island out of the sky after he and his followers had left.

“There is indeed. There are actually at least three, one of which I’ve only ever heard of. I have no idea where it is. But you might run into someone who does on Shabondy Archipelago.” Sonia looked a little shifty for a moment. “Erm, I won’t tell you more than this about them, but we Kuja have two contacts on the Archipelago, both of whom might know where that specific island is.”

“And what’s so special about this island that you’re trying to tease me with information about it?” Nami questioned cocking an eyebrow at her fellow navigator.

Zoro’s shout interrupted their discussion for a moment. “Land... er, cancel that, mountain ahoy! Holy hell, that is... that isn’t an island, it’s a wall of stone, I can’t see the end of it in either direction! We’ve made it Straw Hats! The Red Line!!!”

this caused everyone in the conning tower and in the bridge to rush out onto the main deck shouting and cheering, but even as Nami moved to join the rush, Sonia tapped her on the shoulder. “The Sky Island I’ve only heard about before? It’s supposed to be an island entirely devoted to studying the weather. That’s about all I know about it. But if that’s the case, maybe they could teach you something new about dial combat, if not the weather itself.”

Before she had come to the Grand Line, Nami would’ve scoffed at the idea that she had more to learn about the weather or navigation. But since then, she had developed an almost Luffy-liked outlook on her skills. Nami knew there was always more to be learned.

Okay, color me interested, Nami thought, nodding at Sonia before thought of the future left her mind as she stared out from the top of the stairwell leading from the bridge to the main deck, staring up at the wall stone that Zoro had told the ship. A second later, Luffy appeared nearby in a blast of lightning and moved over to lift Makino into the air. “To the top of the crow’s nest, Straw Hats.”

With no hand at the wheel, Eve slowed the ship down unseen as Sanji lifted Laki into his arms, followed by Zoro doing the same with Nami. Soon, Brook, Chopper Robin and Franky joined them, climbing to the crow's nest and then onto its roof.

The Kuja and the Survivors Alliance all murmured to one another, more interested in the fact this meant they were getting close to the Archipelago and salvation rather than what seeing the Red Line meant for the 'rookies' of the Straw Hat crew. Still, they did understand their emotions and so left them alone for the moment, although Hancock looked up at the Red Belt with a snarl on her lips, her own memories of this wall being nothing positive.

Above, Luffy flashed up to them once more, carrying several steins of ale. He passed them around, popped off and came back with more until every crew member had one, although Brook had set his on the roof below him, playing his violin gently as he stood there.

When everyone had their ale, Luffy gestured upward, his own eyes trailing up as his free hand rose to his Straw Hat. "The Red Line. How long has it been since we passed through Reverse Mountain?"

"Since we entered the Grand Line, it's been a little under four months," Nami said, shaking her head as she stared up the mountain. "Damn, I can't believe we made it here so quickly."

"Heh. Well, remember this is just the first time. We're going to have to see this sight several times if we really are going to achieve your dream, Nami. And Robin's too," Luffy reminded them both.

Both women smiled at him while Sanji and Zoro grinned. "SUUUPERRR!" was Franky's response. "This is just the middle of the first stage of our journey, crew! This ship won't achieve my dream until we've gone all the way around the world!"

"I, I suppose if I want to be a doctor that can cure any disease or wound, then, then traveling the whole world is a prerequisite, huh?" Chopper stammered, although he too looked game."

"What about you, Brook? What's your dream?"

"Yohohohoho. A dream? Well, I suppose that I do have a dream. Laboon. To see my little, Yohohohoho not-so-little now friend once more. To show him that we Rumber Pirates never forgot him."

He played his violin a bit, but no one spoke as he did, waiting for him to go on, even though they had already heard this before. "We found Laboon when he had lost his way, and then Laboon decided to follow us around, attracted by our music, rather than search for his pod. He was so cute, his presence a joy. Yohohohoho he even saved my life once, you know.

And we all promised that we would care for him treat him as a crew member. But several years later, when we decided to journey to the Grand Line, we knew it would be too dangerous for Laboon.”

“Yohohohoho!” Brook paused in his playing, gazing around at the rest of the crew. “Little did we know that it was too dangerous for us as well. And then... well, it took me nearly two decades for my soul to find its way back to my body.” Brook sighed sadly, then shook his head, gesturing to his afro. “This afro, it is a symbol of my promise to my crew, my dream to see Laboon again, to have him recognize me. But... but I am effectively immortal now, and Laboon, Island whales like him live for centuries. So, for giving me a chance, for inviting me into your crew as your musician, I will happily serve in that capacity for as long as you need me to.”

With that, Brook launched into Binks’ Sake as the crew cheered. As he did, though, Luffy looked to an open area next to the currently closed top of the floom. “What about you, Eve? Do you have a dream now?”

That caused everyone to look in the same direction, and Robin found herself holding her breath, nor was she the only one. Eve hadn’t been able to project her entire body out of the *Everlasting Resolve*’s hull since they had left Water 7. She could create hands, mouths, eyes, even, apparently, a full face given how she scared Perona. But this would be the first time they saw the full impact of having transferred ‘Ressy’ into their new ship. And they all knew it was even tougher, given the strangers on the ship.

“Yes, Captain!” At that, Eve slowly materialized, growing up out of the top of the crow’s nest to stand to one side of the hole in the center, where the flagpole stood, holding the Straw Hat skull ‘n bones. One moment she wasn’t there. The next second, Eve stood materialized, one hand grasping the flagpole and beaming around at the crew.

But this most certainly was not the ‘Ressy’ they had known. While Resolve’s original spirit had shown the dichotomy of its owners, the only sign of that left was the marine cap set jauntily on long purple hair, which was long, falling down to the middle of her back. And instead of her original outfit, Eve had seemingly followed up on her interest in Perona’s style, for she wore a gothic Lolita outfit but with light violet on her sleeves and black boots riding up under her wide, frilly underskirt.

Beyond that, Eve was noticeably older by a few years, give or take, and taller coming up to mid-stomach on most of the crew rather than waist height. Her eyes were now blue and violet, the heterochromia another possible sign of her past.

Robin and Nami’s eyes widened, while Makino made approving noises as she looked at the spirit. Laki took it a step further, giving the girl a loud wolf whistle. “Damn Evie, looking like that, if we ever meet a male Klabautermann we might have to beat them off with broadsides!”

“Heh, thanks, Laki! I rather like my new form too.” Eve smiled at her, then looked around at the others. “As for my dream, it’s to continue as we have, for me to be the ship that carries all of you until you achieve your dreams!” She then smirked, pushing up at her marine cap in a move taken directly from Luffy. “And kicking untold amounts of teeth in as we do it!”

Nami, Robin and Chopper didn’t appreciate that as much as the rest of the crew whooped. “In that case, Eve, grab up your beer!”

As Everyone held up their mugs, Luffy nodded over to Brook. “First, let’s officially welcome our newest crewmate. Long may our musician keep our spirits up with his music!” The others cheered, and Luffy held his mug up towards the mountain of stone arching up out of sight above them. “And in honor of Brook, I suppose I should say we’re halfway through the first song! But the show doesn’t end the next time we see this sight. Like Franky says, it won’t end until we’ve all achieved our dreams.”

He paused then, pointing at each crewman as they smiled back at him. “All Blue, greatest swordsman, Rio Poneglyph, map of the whole world, finding Shanks, to have adventures and see the world beyond your homeland. To find Laboon, to be a doctor that can cure anything, to see the ship you built travel the world. To be the freest, strongest of them all, the Pirate King!”

“For our dreams!” the Straw Hats shouted back. “To Raftel and the world beyond!”

Hearing the shouts from above, many of the Survivors Alliance balked, shaking their heads at the madness they were hearing. Getting to Raftel was an impossibility. Becoming the Pirate King was an impossibility. Even beating two Shichibukai as Luffy had wasn’t enough to convince them otherwise, never mind the rest.

Even many of the Kuja thought the same. Raftel was a legend, nothing more. And being Pirate King meant you would have to be strong enough to take on every other power in the seas.

In contrast, Perona heard it and frowned, simply thoughtful and wondering. She knew a bit more about logia powers than most and had watched the Straw Hats training. A Pirate crew that just kept on training kept on getting stronger. Who knew how far that could take them? *And here’s me, stuck with them until Straw Hat decides I’ve worked out my debt to them... Ugh.*

But Hancock heard that and laughed. She laughed long and hard as the Straw Hats appeared on the deck, with Luffy setting Robin down and sending her a grin. And as he did, she nodded. “Now that is the man’s ambition whose name will be strong enough to help protect our land!”

Ranma sent her a tooth-filled grin at that, bowing and sweeping his hat off and along the ground. “So glad you approve, First Captain,” he teased. As Hancock laughed once more

and Robin sighed to one side, resolving once more to talk to Luffy when they got to the Archipelago, Luffy clapped his hands together, bellowing, "All right folks, time to get moving again. Remember, our food issue isn't going to solve itself!"

The ship sailed for another day while most of the three crews became weaker and weaker. The only exceptions were Robin, who had dealt with such conditions before, Boa, Luffy and Franky. But Sanji and his helpers still kept them eating as they continued on.

The evening after they had begun to sail along the Red Line, the needle began to dip precipitously on the log pose, pointing downwards and away. Eventually, it started to point almost straight down, and Sonja nodded in satisfaction as she stared at the device on Nami's wrist. "Right! Now, mark it at a 90° angle, and then we keep on that course from here, deviating for nothing."

Frankie shook his head at that, glumly turning the ship as Nami barked out the moves, with Luffy once more providing the power. He wasn't as bad off as the rest crew as he didn't eat as much normally. After all, most of his stomach was taken up by a refrigerator, and they at least had enough cola to last them another week. But looking out through the windows at the front of the bridge down to the deck, he could see that most of the Survivor's Alliance were splayed out there, conserving energy. "This Archipelago of yours had better be close."

"Yeah, it better..." Luffy blinked suddenly, then closed his eyes. He had taken to using his Kenbunshoku every few hours to try and get used to having it on all the time and see if he could find the minds of any sea kings. Up to this point, the best he'd done was to follow the sea monkeys as they dove to get away from the crew's righteous wrath but he'd just had a 'bite.' "Hold on, Franky. Eve, drop the anchors. I need to go speak to Sanji... or Chopper. One of the two."

Unfortunately for Chopper, the crew had no more bait, no more fish, no more meats. Nothing that could be used to attract the large sea king that Luffy had just sensed moving around below them.

Realizing that Chopper would no doubt object and that convincing him to go along with this idea might take too much time and the sea king could move on, Luffy just barged into the med-bay. Seeing Chopper was just counting out a series of empty pill bottles rather than doing anything important, He grabbed Chopper into his arms even as Chopper turned in his chair to look at him. "Hey Chopper, I need your help to get us all some food. You'll help me, right? Great I knew you would!"

"Wait, what?" Chopper began before he found himself tied up in wire and hoisted under Luffy's arm. "Wait, don't tell me..."

Moments later, the doctor was at the end of a long rope dangling directly over the water next to the Everlasting Resolve. He stared down at the waves an inch below, then twisted

his head up to glare up at his captain. "Luffy, I'm going to get you for this," he said calmly, then he began to thrash as he shouted, "I'm not bait, you asshole! I swear I'm going to get you for this, Luffy! Sleep with one eye open, you bastard! I am going to find the largest syringe in the world and..."

At that point, Chopper was interrupted by the sea around where he was hanging erupting, and a giant sea monster appeared there.

Luffy adroitly flicked the long fishing line away, and the monster missed Chopper, who squealed in anger and a little tiny bit of fear perhaps, as he stared at the monster as it rose out of the ocean.

But as it did, Sanji rocketed forward, as did several of the Kuja. Sanji's blow landed first despite his still broken leg, the impact causing it to spit out something even as the monstrous fish keeled over to float in the water beside the ship.

Luffy watched the object in the air, his eyes widening as he tracked its trajectory. "Oy, Brook, she's coming your way."

Brook looked up from where he had been enthusiastically playing something as he watched the very short battle against the giant sea king. "Mah, Luffy-san, may I ask who?"

Following Luffy's upraised finger, Brook looked up just in time for a face full of scale to crash into him, as a young green-haired mermaid used him as a landing area. "Don't say I didn't warn you, bones-boy," Luffy laughed. "Looks as if we've found a mermaid, guys. Didn't know they came from being spat out from Sea Kings, though!"

End Chapter