

Chapter 37: While You Were Traveling

While 'Ranko,' Makino and Brook were trying to make themselves comfortable, if a cat in a room full of dogs could be called comfortable, in the officer's quarters they had been given to share aboard Gion's ship, there came a knock on the door. Being the closest, Brook opened it, allowing one of Gion's officers into the room.

The officer in question, the ship's bosun stood at attention in the doorway, looking at the three bounty hunters with a jaundiced air. He had heard the official reason for his admiral to have allowed these bounty hunters aboard and was fully aware of her more personalized take on the issue of justice and so forth, so he knew this was part of a recruitment drive.

He'd also heard the unofficial reason that Gion had confided to her officers as the ship was leaving port: that she wasn't confident she could keep both Black Leg Sanji and the Pirate Hunter under control if they somehow both managed to break. Beat them, yes, but not before they could perhaps damage the ship in such a way as to make it sink.

That didn't make him particularly happy, as like most marines he felt that bounty hunters were only a step up from pirates. But he understood the necessity. And he had been given a duty. "Bounty hunters, there is no place aboard this ship for simple passengers. We lost too many men wounded to that blasted Pirate Hunter, and Admiral Gion didn't want to pull from the Shabondy Base. "You'll have to work with the rest of the crew on various tasks to pay for your passage."

"Funny, I thought capturing Black Leg Sanji before he could get away would do that. Still..." Ranko shrugged. "That's fine by us. I can help with the rigging or dealing with any sea monsters we meet up with."

"I'm a quite competent cook," Makino added, holding up her hand while 'Skeleton Jack' wondered aloud if music, sea shanties to make the travel go faster perhaps, would work as his own contribution.

The bosun tried not to stare at the talking skeleton for too long before admitting that would probably work, depending on the songs used.

"What would you do with a drunken sailor?" Ranko snickered.

"I don't care if you are bounty hunters. If I find you drunk on duty, I'll take the lash to you," the bosun cut in grimly before Jack or Elizabeth (Makino's assumed name) could answer, shaking his head. "This is a marine vessel, not a pirate crew, and this is the Grand Line. There's no place for that kind of stupidity here."

Rolling his eyes at the man's overbearing attitude, Ranko waved him off. "Send us a schedule or something when you want us on duty. And you don't have to worry about us

getting drunk on duty. But if you threaten me or mine again like that, were going to have words down on the gun deck.”

This was common parlance for sailors working out their differences directly without the officers getting involved. Like the phrase, ‘kissing the gunner’s daughter,’ it was used across the five seas.

The bosun growled something, then turned on his heel, shutting the door with a slam behind him.

“While I realize he was being quite combative, we’ll be on this ship for several days at least, Ranko. I think it would behoove us to get along with the locals,” Makino observed mildly.

“Up to a point. This isn’t the same thing as it was with Hina and her group. Not only is the balance of power on their side here, or at least as far as they know.” The redhead allowed herself a faint sneer at those words. While Gion would undoubtedly trouble her, the rest of the Marine crew would be meat to a thresher.

Luffy paused then, closing her eyes briefly and concentrating on her environment, letting the rest of the world into her brain for a bit as she used Kenbunshoku. When she was certain that no one could listen in, Luffy went on. “And remember, we’ll be turning on these marines sooner or later. We have no idea about the layout of Impel Down, where my brother could be kept, what the procedures are or anything. We’re heading in blind at this point, and these marines could just as easily be our enemies the moment we arrive there.”

That sobered all of them up and after pondering Hina for a few seconds, Luffy went on, her voice sad but determined. “As good a people as the common marine might be, as interesting as Gion might be, never forget that they’re going to be our enemies. Don’t make friends with them.”

Brook and Makino nodded seriously, understanding the point, although Makino doubted their newest crewmember understood how much that probably cost Luffy. Luffy really didn’t like to fight marines, not just because of his/her grandfather but because the common marine was just a guy following orders. He wasn’t a rapist, murderer or worse, as all too many pirates were. Most common marines could be labeled as blind followers or corrupt in terms of taking bribes or similar, but that was it. Indeed, most marines had entered the profession to do good in the world.

It doesn’t help matters that he probably thinks of it as bullying, Makino reflected. The common marine has about as much chance of hurting Luffy as a little boy armed with a Band-Aid faced with a fully-grown lion. While the lion is rabid and unable to feel pain.

“That actually brings up an interesting point,” Brook stated as he looked out the one porthole their room had, watching the waves go by around them and in the distance, what was

undoubtedly a giant dolphin hopped out of the water. “Not to put a damper on things, but much of this plan relied on the marines acting as they normally do, capturing pirates rather than executing them on the spot. I know that is not how they normally act, but surely, Zoro killing two of the Tenryubito would have forced them to execute him on the spot. Maybe even do so in a horrible and over-the-top manner.”

“No, actually. That made it even more important that the marines capture Zoro,” Luffy shook her head quickly. “Remember, the marines don’t just execute pirates who have bounties to make certain that they stay dead or something. It’s propaganda. The fact that they captured Zoro so quickly after he killed those Tenryubito will make his execution a much bigger propaganda coup than it would otherwise be.”

“Exactly,” Makino nodded in agreement. “It’s depressingly vile, but it makes sense from their perspective. Indeed, it would’ve made more sense if he was thought to have some kind of Devil Fruit.”

“And Sanji is still wanted alive only, for some reason. And unfortunately, this will all probably mean they’re gonna fix his wanted poster. That bounty poster allowed him almost as much anonymity as you two.” Luffy allowed herself to grin then, shaking off the somewhat grim mood. “That, and it was fucking funny as hell!”

His companions laughed, and Luffy pulled a deck of cards from his weapon space, playing with them between his hands. “So, do either of you want to play a game?”

“Nothing to do with hand-eye coordination,” Makino said as she turned from where she had also been hanging up a hammock for herself along one of the interior bulkheads of the room. “You’d cheat too much just by being you.”

“I was quite the card shark at one point. I always had something hidden up my sleeves. Of course, since I’m all skin and bones now, having something up my sleeves won’t quite very well. Or maybe I can hide something bigger up there without my skin getting in the way. Yohohohoho, skull joke!”

Rolling his eyes, Luffy pointed to her face. “Remind me to tell you both the story of how the bandits who raised me had to literally beat it into me how to keep my face straight as I played poker. I had a hell of a time controlling my face, let me tell you...”

OOOOOO

Later that day, as Ranko took her first turn up on the rigging and Makino made the acquaintance of the ship's cook and the galley staff, Gion was told that Zoro had woken up from his Gion-induced unconsciousness. “That’s pretty damn quick. I had thought he’d be out of it for at least a few days.”

The ship's doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Given the sheer amount of wounds this man has taken, it makes some sense that his body is used to healing from wounds. It was a good thing though that you ordered me to see to him in his cell, as the first thing he tried to do was break out, Admiral. Though, the Seastone-handcuffs are holding."

"I would be utterly astonished if they didn't. The only person I know strong enough to break out of Seastone chains is..." Gion stuttered to a halt, shaking her head and waving the doctor off. "Nevermind. I'm going to go see the Pirate Hunter. I have some questions for him."

I was going to say Garp, and even then, he needed leverage to do it and was drunk off his ass on rum. Swear to God, getting him and Kizaru both drunk was the most hilarious thing I've ever done. But given how Garp turned against the Marines, I don't think mentioning him would be a good idea, Gion reflected as she followed the doctor out of the door, heading deeper into the ship as she made her way to the sick bay. *I hope Garp will eventually come around, but I don't see that happening. Not when the marines basically put a hit out on his grandson without any real reason.*

Gion wasn't certain what she would've done in Garp's situation. Part of her felt she would probably have put family before duty, but then again, these orders, the order to truly push forward with the Shichibukai ambush of the Straw Hats, had come from the top. If that had happened, Gion wasn't happy about realizing it, but she felt that she probably would've gone along with things. *Then again, Garp is a hell of a lot stronger... and more independent-minded than I am.*

Shaking off her morose thoughts, Gion entered the prison deck, quickly reaching the two occupied cells. On one side, Sanji still lay unconscious, something that somewhat annoyed Gion. *Are you telling me that the beating Ranko gave him was worse than the one I gave Zoro? That hurts my pride a bit.* On the other, Zoro sat upright, his legs crossed under him in a meditation pose, seemingly not bothered by the chains linking him to the wall. All four limbs were chained to the wall, although there was enough movement in the chains to let him move freely in his cell. That way, he could move forward just enough to grab a tray once it was shoved underneath the slot at the bottom of the cell door.

He didn't open his eyes as Gion stood there for a moment, studying him.

The doctor hadn't bothered with giving the man a shirt after patching him up, and beyond the new wound that Gion had given him, Gion could see several other wounds, including one massive one that went from one shoulder down to his opposite hip. The size of that wound, the scarring around it, made the wound that Gion had given him seemingly pale in comparison.

Gion had been a swordswoman for longer than Zoro had been alive... Although if anyone tried to ask Gion her age, they would be sleeping with Davy Jones within seconds. She could recognize a wound that should have killed someone easily enough. The blade that did

that was large, something like a Zweihander perhaps, or even larger, but wickedly sharp. The blow should also have cut deeper than it looked to have unless Zoro had taken a step back at just the right moment.

However, Zoro didn't strike her as the sort to take a step back, so Gion wondered about the story behind that wound. Almost as much as she wondered about both the history of Zoro and his swords. "You know, from the moment I heard about you, I've wondered why someone who earned the appellation of Pirate Hunter somehow joined pirates."

"What's it to you?" Zoro grumbled, now opening his eyes to look up at her for a moment before closing them again.

The dismissal made Gion roll her eyes, not taking umbrage from it, seeing that act as a bit of bravado from the younger man. "You have to admit, it doesn't really make much sense. You were a well-regarded bounty hunter, known for bringing in dead and still living bounties who hadn't made waves in East blue. Then suddenly, you are part of a pirate crew, one who takes on first Sawtooth Arlong, then the Shichibukai Crocodile, killing the well-known assassin, Daz Bones."

Zoro blinked, now opening his eyes to look up at her in confusion. "Who?"

"You probably know him as Mister 1," Gion snorted. But she still stared down at Zoro, demanding answers. "Humor me. Why did a bounty hunter become a pirate? And why, if you did, did you join a crew heading into the Grand Line?"

"..." Zoro glared up at her, but after a moment, he simply shrugged and began his tale.

Soon, Gion was furious, and her hand came up, crashing into the jail cell loud enough to finally rouse Sanji from his unconscious state. He grunted and groaned in his sleep behind her, opening his eyes as Gion spoke. "Dammit! Those Marines were pathetic!"

The waking Sanji was faced with Gion's backside, and since she wasn't wearing her officer's coat, this allowed Gion's short skirt-clad rear and long legs to be seen quite well from his angle. Hearts replaced his eyes as Sanji mumbled, "Gorgeous, beautiful, Mellorine, Mellorine," under his breath.

But Gion didn't notice this. She was too busy ranting, pacing back and forth between the cells. "The morons should've tried to recruit you! Setting aside everything else, any marine worth his salt is always on the lookout for talent. This Blunt Head Morgan or whatever his name was, he was the one that took down Thousand Plans Kuro. I thought he had the reputation of a bit of a meathead, but to be so arrogant, so full of himself and corrupt? That is beyond the pale."

“You say that like there aren’t other corrupt Marines out there.” Zoro snorted, rolling his eyes.

Gion breathed deeply, crossing her arms under her admittedly impressive chest, which Zoro noticed and then very deliberately kicked into the portion of his brain marked ‘does not deal with swords, food or sleep, therefore can be ignored’. Admittedly, quite a large portion of his brain was devoted to housing this section, but Zoro was used to ignoring everything within.

“Still. You didn’t answer me about why you joined Straw Hat’s crew.”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Zoro snorted again. “Luffy was the one who freed me after making me promise to join his crew. I wouldn’t have signed up with him like that, but he impressed me with his ambition to become the Pirate King. Since I figured that meant he’d be a worthy captain to the man trying to be the world’s greatest swordsman, I agreed.” Zoro smiled a real smile rather than his normal smirks or sneers. “I like to think it’s worked out pretty damn well.”

That was about as close as someone like Zoro would ever get to saying that he enjoyed being on Luffy’s crew. Or that the two of them had become friends. Even so, Sanji, still staring at Gion’s rear in adoration, had to hold back a snort. *The swordsman really is quite soft on the inside, just like a Marimo.*

“Really? Getting on the bad side of the World Government and having your entire crew almost be wiped out by three Shichibukai? That’s working out pretty damn well?” Gion laughed dryly. “If that’s your idea of a good time, you need your head examined. And what’s this about you being the best swordsman in the world? I think our battles proved that you’ve got a ways to go.”

“Yes, it did.” Something in Zoro’s voice made Gion’s spines stiffen, and she found her eyes locked onto his as he continued. “It showed me precisely how far along I am and how far I have to go. I never said that I was the best swordsman in the world. That is my dream, my **goal!** Every fight I have, scar, and roadblock is something to learn and grow from. Our battle was no different.”

Gion snorted, breaking away from his eyes as she shook her head. *Those are not the eyes of a man in chains.* “I can understand dreaming big, I suppose, and that isn’t a bad attitude to have, pirate or not. But now you’re going to die having chased that dream.”

That look did not go away as Zoro replied. Rather he just grinned. “If that is all I was worth, then dying like this isn’t something I’ll regret.”

Fighting back her habitual snort once more, Gion cocked her head, staring at the young swordsman thoughtfully. “Your willingness to die to achieve your dream is admirable. Still, what would you do if I offered you a chance to live? You’d have to assume a different identity and be

forced to join the marines, of course. But seeing a swordsman like you executed would leave a bad taste in my mouth.”

Now it was Zoro’s turn to snort, realizing that his killing the Tenryubito didn’t really matter to Gion. But they mattered to Zoro, not so much the act, or the bastards themselves but in the corruption they were evidence of. “You think I could be a Marine? Someone like you? I’m not nearly blind enough for that.”

Gion snarled a bit at that, but she allowed Zoro his piece as he went on. “We freaking fought outside a slave auction house that was **legal** in the eyes of the World Government, where your precious Tenryubito was trying to buy slaves! Why the fuck would I join up with any group trying to defend that kind of shit?”

“You have a point. If you can’t turn a blind eye to that thing, there is very little future for anyone in the marines.” Gion shrugged. “I tend to concentrate on the good I’m able to do and never have anything to do with the Tenryubito or slavery.”

Zoro sneered at that. “That’s a lot of your line of sight you’re blocking, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes it feels like that. But then I remember the number of times my ship has come upon a pirate vessel after it sunk a merchantman or when we arrive during or after a band of pirates have ransacked a town, pillaging, slaying, raping. And then, I know I’m still fighting the good fight,” Gion retorted, her eyes flashing magenta fire. “The World Government isn’t perfect, and the Tenryubito are a cancer. But they’re still better than the alternative.”

Shaking her head, Gion set that aside. It had only been an offhand thought, after all. She really didn’t think Zoro was the type to join the Marines, although it was true that the World Government would have been easily able to give him a new identity. She had heard rumors about someone in the World Government having a Devil Fruit that allowed them to manipulate someone’s flesh like clay. If the normal means of changing his appearance couldn’t work for whatever reason, there was always that alternative. But if Zoro didn’t wish to bend, he’d be buried instead.

Still, she set it aside, as well as why she had wanted to offer that option. It wasn’t something Gion had ever offered any other pirate, but somehow, Zoro seemed a little too... something... for her to want him dead. *Driven maybe? Interesting?* “Tell me something else. How did you escape?”

When Zoro looked confused, she rolled her eyes. “The first time we fought, you idiot. When my men and I ambushed you in that small village. You were losing, you retreated, ran behind a tree and somehow disappeared. Is that some kind of Devil Fruit?”

For a moment, Zoro struggled with what part of that statement he had most of an issue with: the idea that he had run away, the fact Zoro really had been forced to retreat, or the idea

that he would use a Devil Fruit in whatever fashion. As a swordsman, he felt that using Devil Fruit in any fashion would be dishonorable. It was only his skills with the blade that mattered. “What the hell are you talking about? I just retreated through the woods, that’s all.”

“That is the most bald-faced lie I’ve heard since Seamen Georgino attempted to explain where he still came from. One moment you were running away through the woods,” Gion repeated, “then suddenly, I can’t even find you with my Kenbunshoku! I never thought a swordsman with so much pride would be so good at running away. You obviously had something planned ahead of time there.”

Zoro surged to his feet, lunging forward. His arms were quickly pulled back behind him, causing Zoro to grunt a bit at the pain this caused his shoulders. But he still leaned as close to the bars as he could as he snarled, “What was that woman?! How dare you insinuate I was ready to run like that! I would’ve kept on fighting, but you were the one who suddenly disappeared on me! You and the rest of that hamlet.”

Reaching through the bars, Gion grabbed Zoro’s face, twisting and pulling it in separate directions before squishing it as he snarled at her. “Oh, really? So you’re saying it’s my fault now? I don’t know if you’re delusional or lying to me. Confess! You have some strange Devil Fruit power at the very least to get away from me like that!”

“And I tell you, it was you who had to retreat! Your precious Marines and the rest of you lost your way in the woods, simple as that. It’s not my fault you needed a breather!” Zoro ground out, his words occasionally distorted by what Gion was doing to his face even as he tried to ignore it. “If we had kept fighting, I might’ve won that battle.”

“So you are delusional!” Gion laughed but kept on playing with his face. “I thought I was winning that fight, considering how exhausted you looked as you **RAN AWAY.**”

Zoro grunted a second time, trying to pull out of her grip and failing. But his snark was still on display as he replied, “Whatever helps you sleep at night!”

“The sight of your swords mounted on my wall will help me sleep well tonight, I’ll admit,” Gion taunted, “Until, at least, I know you’re using a Devil Fruit of some kind. Judging by your answers thus far, I refuse to believe you are some kind of secret master strategist. You’re too blunt and stupid for that.”

“You touch my swords at all, and I will skewer you with them when I break out of here!” Zoro snarled, once more trying to pull in his chains and having no luck.

“You keep piling fantasies upon more fantasies, don’t you?!” Gion laughed again, pulling his jaw down and his face up by his nostrils, twisting his head around. “Next, you’ll tell me that your Devil Fruit power allows you to somehow escape Seastone? Face reality!”

How long this could have gone on for was anyone's guess, but at this point, they were interrupted by Sanji, who had finally broken out of his heart-shaped-rear-induced paralysis. "Is, is this what swords people call flirting? I'm honestly a little confused, and I don't think more than half of that has to do with the concussion that Ranko gave me."

At that, Gion flushed a bit, only now realizing how far forward she had leaned, sticking her head through the cell door bars to glare more closely at Zoro. Her hands dropped from his face like his skin had become suddenly red-hot, and she stepped back away from the bars, whirling on Sanji and glaring at him.

Zoro also flinched away from the point of contact. Still, he hadn't yet diverted his eyes to the side as Gion turned, and like Sanji, far more subtly and surprisingly perhaps, he was struck a little by the view now before his eyes. Still, he turned away as Gion spoke to Sanji, and thankfully for his dignity, neither Gion nor Sanji had noticed.

"That was questioning! If you want to upgrade to interrogation, keep throwing insinuations my way, boy! I've got several of my crew who are just dying to break out the thumbscrews on both of you. Not that either of you has any information we need to know, but it would be great practice for them," Gion growled.

"I apologize most profusely, Madame. The sight of anyone trying to flirt with that fool is so astonishing I had to comment on it. And as I said, I am still suffering from some severe head trauma, admittedly," so saying, Sanji rose from where he had been sitting, bowing as much as the chains around his arms would allow. This wasn't much, but the sentiment was there, at least. "I do not believe we have been formally introduced. Sanji, at your service, in whatever capacity you require."

"I know you're trying to sound debonair, youngster, but to me, you sound a little too creepy," Gion laughed, using that laughter and her taunting of Sanji to get over her embarrassment. She also was using the continued reminder of how young these pirates were compared to her as a shield against the fact that she really... might... have been flirting with Zoro a little bit. *All right, so his body is precisely the kind of body I like to see in a man, and there's something really compelling about his intensity. But still, he's both a pirate, someone on death row, and a pirate you just beat and captured. This is not some tawdry romance novel from the New World. This is reality. That kind of thing doesn't happen!*

"You wound me, milady. There is no set age where one awakes to beauty, regardless of beauty in question," Sanji shook his head, then sat down on the cot in his cell, noting that it was barely large enough for him to lay out on and there was no sign of any blanket. The Marines did not believe in allowing their prisoners any creature comforts. He did not remark on this aloud, only saying, "But surely, if you don't need anything from us, there's no reason to torture us either. Although could I request to be moved to a different cell away from the national treasure? The last thing I need to see every day is his ugly face."

“At least you don’t have to stare at that swirly brow of yours, Aho-Cook! Seeing that thing so often will make me more seasick than the motion of the ocean~! And I don’t want to even think about what you might mumble in your sleep. I like my sanity where it is, thank you!” Zoro retorted.

Gion rolled her eyes but was somewhat grateful that the strange moment of embarrassment had passed. “No, I’m not moving into another cell. I quite like the idea of you two suffering from one another’s company. Although how the hell you would get along on an actual pirate crew while disliking one another as you seem to, is beyond me.”

“Our Captain and the rest of them were there to provide a buffer between us,” Zoro said, spitting to one side and deciding to reinforce the idea that his Captain was dead. “You Marines saw to that.”

“How exactly did you two survive anyway?” Gion asked, suddenly pouncing on that minor mystery.

Sanji was the quicker of the two and knew the admiral was fishing for information, and he didn’t trust Zoro to answer. Instead, Sanji came up with something on the spot, shrugging his shoulders laconically. “If the beautiful lady wishes to ask, this gentle knight will answer. It was pure happenstance, really. The two of us were fighting separately at first, but then Zoro knocked this large Amazonian woman toward me, which interrupted my fight with a group of zombies. They turn on one another, and Zoro and I are able to retreat, as one of the zombies’ shouts out that the time had come to turn on the Amazons.”

He sighed faintly, looking away from Gion, his fingers twitching for a cigarette. “They also announced our captain was dead and we did see his body sinking into the ocean before we retreated. Neither of us had any desire to get between a fight between two Shichibukai at that point, battered as we were. We set aside our differences for the moment and were able to capture one of Thriller Bark’s lifeboats, and were able to get out to sea as the whole place began to shiver and shake. I had a devil of a time convincing this one that leaving was smarter than trying to fight, but no one said a swordsman had to have a brain.”

“OY!” Zoro growled. “It’s not my fault I had something like a loyalty to our captain! And if one of us had been there to fight with them maybe...”

Rolling her eyes, Gion decided that was a much of an answer as she was going to get out of these two and decided that leaving them to argue across the deck at one another was punishment enough. “That’s all I wanted to know. Enjoy your last few breaths of sea air gentlemen. Soon enough, you will be in Impel Down and it will be the last hint of freedom you ever have.”

Gion walked off, at that, leaving the two men still arguing behind her as if they hadn’t even heard her words. This went on until her footsteps disappeared up the stairs to the next

deck upward, and then Zoro and Sanji paused. Then the swordsman shrugged his shoulders, leaning back from where he had been trying to reach out for the bars, and moving back to his bunk. "Well, we're here. I hope you're ready for this love cook. You weren't supposed to be here for this part."

"I can handle anything you can, you national treasure!" Sanji retorted, shaking his head. "I just hope the rest of this plan goes as well..." His voice trailed off, and Zoro looked across it at him not in his normal sneering manner but one of utter shock. "Did I..."

"Yep. The moment I get out of these chains, I'm going to bang you one upside the head. You should know better by now not to tempt fate like that!" Zoro growled, and Sanji hung his head, for once having no ability to respond whatsoever.

OOOOOO

Behind the ship back on the Archipelago, Sentomaru leaped down on top of a group of five pirates, his Haki infused landing shattering the ground, sending them stumbling back. "Captain Kid and the Kid pirates, I'm here to arrest you. Surrender now!"

Their captain reacted by leaping into the air slightly, bringing around his sword in a cut towards Sentomaru's arm. "Has anyone actually surrendered when asked?! Seriously, why do marines bother with that shit!?"

"Politeness, I suppose," Sentomaru snorted, bantering back very slightly as he deflected Kid's strike with a palm to the side before bringing around a kick that nearly took Kid's head off. But Kid countered by pushing at Sentomaru's foot as it passed, putting the big man off balance for a second. This was then compounded when a semi-recovered Killer leaped onto the large man's back. "GRAHHH!!"

Sentomaru moved fast for such a big man, and he whirled, dropping his axe and battering aside both of Killer's attacks before striking him with a dual palm in the chest. "Doskoi!"

The blow hammered into Killer, and Killer had yet to recover from his extremely brief meeting with Gion. Blood burst out from the wound she had caused across his chest, as ribs underneath broke from the impact, and he was hurled away through the woods, blood appearing from every hole in his mask.

"Shit!" Kid snarled before reaching out with his powers and grabbing at the axe and anything else metal in the hamlet they had been passing through. While people screamed and retreated everywhere, the metal flew at Sentomaru from every direction.

Grunting in annoyance, Sentomaru whirled, his palms flashing in every direction in a defensive kata that he had learned from Sengoku. "Thousand Palm Striking Wheel!"

He still took a few cuts, but mainly, this assault let Kid gain some time, which he used to race in the direction his first mate had been flung. As he ran, he pulled out a Den Den Mushi, talking into it quickly. "This is Kid! Killer's down. We're on Grove Seven, come to us as best we can. We need some help here."

Finishing battering aside the flying bits of metal, even though several of them had zoomed in repeatedly. Sentomaru turned, seeing where Kit had gone and raced after them. "I'll be damned if I allow the only pirates I've found today to escape!"

Judging by the report that the two Pacifistas had sent him before his spotting Kid, he was the only one having any luck at all. Sentomaru doubted any of the roving bands of World Government soldiers would find anything on their own. *Or, if they run into one of the Supernovas, survive the experience.*

Regardless, it looked as if most of the pirate crews had already left the Archipelago, and not even Pacifistas could track someone over open water across any ocean, let alone in the Grand Line. *If you are over the horizon, you might as well be on another island. However, I refuse to let Admiral Gion and that bounty hunter, no matter how attractive, be the only victories today.*

He smashed several trees out of his way as he raced after Kid, noticing the shorter man could put on a surprising turn of speed despite now carrying his crewmate's body.

Even as he ran, Kid was talking rapidly into his communicator, directing his crew on what he wanted them to do. And finally, finally, as he ducked under a hurled tree branch that would probably have taken his head off if he hadn't, Kid saw a break in the line of trees ahead of them. The land fell away to demark where one grove ended and another began, connected by a small bridge.

Kid raced across the bridge, and Sentomaru followed, leaping into the air and closing with Geppo. But just as he did, someone below shouted, "Now!"

Below in the water between the two groves, a small vessel bobbed on the waves. This was the Scrapper, the ship's boat for Captain Kid's pirate vessel. Although he didn't really use it like most pirates would, simply to ferry people around. Rather, it was fitted with several small cannons, each of which fired what amounted to shrapnel rounds, giving Kid useful amounts of metal to use in any battle and providing a nasty first punch against any defenders when they came ashore.

It didn't work this time. Sentomaru simply shouted his defensive technique again and flipped himself so that his hands were facing downwards, smashing out hard air cannon-like blasts, disrupting the incoming shrapnel.

A second later, Sentomaru landed on the boat. Two pirates aboard grabbed swords, but a single stomp shattered the deck, dumping the crewmen, who had been manning the gun and moving the boat into the water.

Sentomaru leaped upwards, landing on the ground again, seeing that Kid had turned back to him. Another pirate was running away through the woods carrying Killer, and Kid had been joined by two of his officers, or at least Sentomaru assumed they were officers. *The general rule of thumb for pirates seems to be that the more bizarre you dress, the stronger you are.* "Surrender, Eustass Kid, and I might let some of your crew go."

Kit simply sneered, and behind Sentomaru, all of the shrapnel from the recent blast and parts of the ship rose into the air, hurling itself at his back. The cannons also rose from the ocean and hovered above the battle as the three pirates closed quickly. The next moment, as Sentomaru blocked one blow from a trident and ducked under a sword strike from Kid, the cannons barreled into his back, causing him to grunt in pain.

But even as he did, the Trident wielder was smashed aside, hurled into a tree, and slid down unconscious. Another crewman appeared, grabbing at him, as several waterlogged pirates climbed up the sheer cliff-like face of the grove behind the fight.

Kid ducked and weaved through Sentomaru's strikes, his sword flicking out, trying to catch Sentomaru when his blows extended too far. Meanwhile, the cannons twirled above them, ducking down and smashing at Sentomaru occasionally, and the zombielike man circled the battle, looking for an opening to use his spear.

A moment later, Sentomaru nearly struck Kid across the face, and then, the zombie breathed out, launching a fireball from his mouth point-blank into Sentomaru. Sentomaru's fist impacted the fireball, but that did nothing, simply searing his hand a bit, causing him to hiss and cover his limbs with his limited Busoshoku as the flames washed over his hand.

Kid had seen that wince and now backed away shouting, "Again!" while sending the cannons to crash into Sentomaru's legs as Sentomaru made to jump towards his crewman.

The big man stumbled and was hit by another fireball, causing him to grunt in real pain as his clothing caught fire. He wasn't good enough with Busoshoku to cover his entire body with it; indeed, even the flesh under his Busoshoku-covered hands was beginning to sting from the heat.

Thinking quickly, Kid grabbed a gourd at his side, filled with alcohol. This he tossed onto Sentomaru. The fire completely caught on Sentomaru's clothing and body, causing him to pull back, stop, and roll around on the ground. "FUCK you, you pirate bastard!"

"Retreat!" Kit shouted. Although Kid didn't like to admit it, this guy was a juggernaut and seemed intent on just barreling through everything they could throw at him. The better

part of valor was certainly the better way to go now. He and Heat twisted away, grabbing two of the wounded from the ship's boat and tugging them into the woods until they could run under their own power.

Sentomaru put out the fires on him, leaping to his feet and cursing himself. "Dammit, I should've called in the Pacifistas! But then again, against Kid, I don't know how much use they would be. Blast it!"

He raced after the pirates, but as he burst through the woods on the other side of the Grove, he realized that the Pirates had reached their vessel. There was still a fight going on out there. One of the Pacifistas had apparently taken it upon itself to start patrolling the outer edge of the Archipelago. It was one of the ones that looked like Vice Admiral Doberman. The cyborgs were far larger across the shoulders and in height than Doberman had been, although the cyborg's face was a perfect facsimile. Same snarling face, same x-shaped scars, same mustache. Indeed, to anyone who didn't know the man very well, at least in looks, the Dogfist cyborg was a match for Akainu's former protégé.

Without even stopping, Sentomaru kicked up into the air, racing towards the ship where the cyborg was also attacking from the air.

Kid cursed as he saw Sentomaru coming. "That bastard's still coming after us! Portside, take him under fire, starboard, keep trying to nail that marine!"

"We can't elevate our guns enough, Captain!" shouted one of his crewmen. And this was true. Only the three guns on the main deck could truly be said to be able to elevate to any degree. The guns down in the gun deck had no chance whatsoever to hit a flying target unless said target was stupid enough to enter their firing arcs.

"Just fire the damn things. I'll do the rest!" Kid snarled, fighting the urge to roll his eyes at the man's idiocy. Thankfully, Wire had recovered from the hard knock he'd taken and kept the guns firing on the incoming fat asshole, as well as calling those of the crew not already firing guns or seeing to the rigging to the side to use their rifles. This slowed Sentomaru's charge toward the ship, but it did pull several men away from dealing with the fire that the Marine admiral had sent their way from his mouth, which quickly began to spread.

I didn't know Doberman had that kind of Devil Fruit, but at least it's obvious when he's launching that kind of attack!

Having just seen Doberman opening his mouth again, Kid grabbed one of the cannons yet to fire in his latest fusillade from the main deck, hurling it in the direction of the Marine officer. The Canon blocked the blast somewhat, melting and being sent to one side, causing the beam to miss to the side from where it would have otherwise smashed into the mast low near the deck.

By this point, most of the other cannons of the starboard cited also fired, and Kid reached out with his powers before they could get too far out of range, redirecting the cannons straight up toward the marine admiral from several directions. Doberman twisted, battering aside the cannonballs with both hands even as he kept his head twisted to look at the ship.

It was an almost inhuman gesture, one that caused Kids to stare. But as one of the cannonballs he was controlling got close to Doberman, his eyes widened as he detected far more metal than he should have been. *What the hell... what is he... no it doesn't matter, time to tear him apart!*

Kid held up both hands with a sudden wicked grin, almost as if cupping the distant Doberman between them. "You came too close fucker!" With that, he gripped the metal he could sense within the Marine and tore it in every direction.

To Kid's surprise, Doberman didn't even scream as bits of the metal within him began to pull in different directions. Hoses within his body burst, wires tore out of their placements, and entire bits of plating buckled and were torn away. Kid's power wasn't so strong yet that he could tear the guy apart, but enough bits came free to puncture back out of Doberman's body, doing further damage, and something within it died.

The Marine's eyes went dead, and the energy building within his mouth dissipated, fading away quickly as it fell into the ocean.

"Full sail! Make full sail, full speed ahead, direction wherever the fuck the wind is blowing!" Kit shouted, not taking the time to gloat over his victory. The fat bastard that had been dealing with him so easily was still following them, only a bit on fire around the edges and furious looking. "Prepare the nets!"

Several of his people turned from where they had finally put out the fire and raced into the ship. By the time they were back, Sentomaru was nearly directly over the ship, having dodged through their defensive fire. He was only slowed when Kid once more began to direct the cannonballs and musket balls at him from every direction.

Without needing to be given a command, the members of his crew who had raced into the ship fired the nets into the air toward Sentomaru. He would have simply dodged them, but the metal bits within the nets allowed Kid to control them too.

Coming in from every direction, the nets flummoxed Sentomaru. He didn't have a technique that could cut things, having always relied on his axe for that kind of thing. An axe he'd lost when Ranko shattered it after he tried to make fun of her. None of his sumo-style martial arts had any kind of cutting technique, and he didn't know if even his defensive technique wasn't quick enough to keep the nets at bay. They kept trying to wrap around his hands when he struck them, encumbering him.

This took his attention away from the cannonballs, which also started to slam into his defenses. Occasionally one got through to crash into his shoulder, chest or foot, but Sentomaru gritted his teeth, dealing with the pain. While he couldn't use Busoshoku across his entire body, he still had a high pain threshold.

Soon several cannonballs began to fall toward the ocean, no longer under Kid's control. Realizing what this meant, Sentomaru turned his attention towards the ship for the first time since the nets had been fired and saw that it was nearly over the horizon already.

Growling, Sentomaru shook his head, turning back to the distant Archipelago, only now realizing how far away from it he had pursued the pirates. Now that battle was over, he was also beginning to feel the various injuries he had taken.

Sentomaru pushed through the pain doggedly as he pulled out his Den Den Mushi. "This is Sentomaru, have there been any further pirate sightings?"

Moments later, both his own folk from the World Government, the one remaining Pacifista and the marines still combing through the Archipelago reported in. They'd rounded up a lot of small fries, local criminals, bands of bounty hunters who were just this side of being Kidnappers, and even a few unknown pirates, but none of the big names. All of them had either apparently flown the coop or gone to ground.

Scowling, Sentomaru ordered, "Send runners back to the marine outpost and the commodore there. He's to release his people to help us further. We'll try to make up a map of the Archipelago, narrow down where any of them could be hiding still."

"...Sir, are you sure? We've already lost one of the cyborgs, and if several pirate crews start to work together, we might not have enough local firepower," cautioned one of the World Government officers.

Normally, an assault on a Tenryubito would be met with the utter destruction of whoever launched it and the island in question. The Archipelago, however, was too important to the World Government in many ways, not least of which was how it let them have a hand on the pulse of the underworld. Still, the response should have included an Admiral at least, but given Garp's betrayal, that was impossible. And with Kizaru and the various Vice Admirals sticking close to home, trying to run damage control with the rank and file, there was no way the marines could send them reinforcements. And the World Government's CP9 was already destroyed, leaving them with few other units that could be sent here, none of which could be sent at the drop of a hat.

Sentomaru scowled but, staring down at his battered body, admitted the man had a point. If Kid and his crew had been able to fight Sentomaru so well, then maybe even a Pacifista could be overcome by the others working together. *Especially if the report that Trafalgar Law*

was here as well as the other Supernova was accurate. He's almost as much a person of interest to the World Government as Jewelry Bonny, and I know she's around someplace too.

He sighed faintly. *And I have to admit that part of me wanted to take some pirates down quickly and maybe meet up with Gion and her crew at Enies Lobby, maybe impress her. Now that's a pipe dream. "You're right. Recall the Pacifista. I'll lead it and a smaller group to canvas the Archipelago to make certain. It will be slow going, but certain." I'll just have to wait to see if that redhead likes big-boned people until the next time I see her,* he thought morosely.

OOOOOO

Ranko blinked, looking down at her forearms, where a series of goosebumps had appeared on her upper chest and arms. When she pulled back her shirt, however, Ranko saw the goosebumps stopped at the elbows and hadn't been accompanied by any kind of shiver, which told her that she had dodged a bullet. Ranko let out a loud sigh of relief. "Woo, awesome!"

Makino and Brook, who had joined Ranko on deck after their first meal aboard the marine vessel, looked at her in confusion.

"What is awesome?" Makino asked, looking over the ocean to one side of the ship. They'd had pretty good weather since setting out from Shabondy more than half a day back. Which just meant that the Grand Line was going to be smashing them upside the head sometime soon. A fact Gion and all the marines knew just as well as the trio of undercover pirates.

The green-haired woman smiled, feeling somehow whimsical despite the nature of the mission they were on currently. *Rule number one for the Grand Line: always expect the unexpected. Rule number two for the Grand Line: You die when you forget rule one. Rule number three: good weather is a lie.*

"I just got a number Two B shiver," Ranko explained. "Normally, a number two means bad things, but a Two B means whoever was going to try and flirt with me just realized he wouldn't get the chance." *Freaking Kodachi. Ugh. How many freaking months after she first showed up was it that I'd get that feeling at least once every three days?*

"What?" Brook, or rather, Skeleton Jack as was his current pseudonym, blinked, cocking his head in confusion. "You actually can tell when someone is going to flirt with you?"

"Eeh, it's not a perfect science, unfortunately," Ranko grumbled a little while Makino giggled, and one of the marine deck officers nearby gestured for Ranko to join them. "But sometimes, I just get these feelings. Hopefully, we'll never know what happened."

OOOOOO

While the events at the Auction House had been going on, Robin, Hancock and the rest of the combined crew of the *Everlasting Resolve* were moving the vessel deeper into the lower levels of the Archipelago. Ironically, this meant they moved closer to where Sanji and Zorro had been captured, the Auction House being located in Grove One. However, here in the depths of the Archipelago, the lawless zone, it was easier to hide here regardless of what was going on, rather than hide in the upper numbers. It not only removed the ship from where most of the marines and regular civilians were, but these areas were also far more overgrown with mangrove shoots than the higher numbers, making it easier for their ship to hide.

As she began to bark orders to pull the ship against the grove on their left and tie it down, Hancock was somewhat pleased by how the day had gone. The plan had, so far anyway, gone off as well as could possibly be expected. And the Straw Hats left with her Kuja had followed her orders.

She had been concerned about that. Not that she couldn't get them to obey, Hancock knew that her presence alone would force people to obey her orders if required. Nevertheless, she worried that arguing with Nami and Robin, the two most likely to balk at being ordered about, would cause hard feelings between them. However, Nami surprised her by simply saluting and following orders. And every so often, as the ship made its way through the Archipelago, Nami occasionally turned unerringly towards where the marine base was and where Gion's flagship had been.

Perona was the only one who made waves, and Hancock was able to kick her into line easily, if literally, kicking her from one side of the bridge to the other. After that she obeyed readily, sending out her Ghost Hollows, whenever ordered... and hiding behind someone else whenever she could as she stayed well away from Hancock.

As the ship was tied into place, Hancock concentrated briefly on her Kenbunshoku, nodding her head grimly after a few seconds. "Marigold, there are a group of locals just out of sight to our port side. Take two of the others with you and see to them. I think some of the girls are getting a bit restless. Sonia, get out the tarpaulin. Franky, you're in charge of hiding the ship from the ground. Then start setting up what you need to build my Kuja a ship."

"OW! SUPPPER!! I've got a lot of ideas on that. Shabondy Archipelago's weird water system is perfect for a drydock!" Franky exclaimed, posing from where he had just stepped back from the wheel.

Hancock smiled wanly. Although she had gotten used to the other men aboard the Straw Hats' ship, she was still a little put off by Franky for some reason. *It's his legs. His legs are so hairy... Ugh, I hope Luffy isn't that hairy. That would be disgusting.* Shaking her head at both parts of that thought, Hancock looked over at Robin. "How is your Filet Lancé par L'araignée (Spider's Flung Net) now?"

Robin grimaced a bit, shaking her head from where she was standing, her eyes closed as she concentrated on the hundreds of eyes she had summoned with her Devil Fruit. But instead of doing so in a wide circumference, she had sent them out in a single direction for a time before expanding her range at intervals. That had allowed her to watch the battle between the Kid pirates and the odd-looking World Government rep. Even now, she was watching that area, although the distance pushed her powers to their limits. "That overlarge fellow is staying within the Archipelago. We must ensure the ship can't be seen from the air."

"HOROHOROHORO! I think that so long as we are not facing Doberman, my Hollows would..." Perona began, only for Robin to cut her off.

"Unfortunately, I spotted the large fellow using Busoshoku and air cannon attacks. I know at least the first works to block your hollows," Robin said before looking at Nami. She was the only one there who had been part of the crew when the Straw Hats had last seen Doberman and still looked shocked at the news Robin had reported a moment ago.

"There's no sign of him coming back, is there?" Nami asked quickly. "I don't think any of us but Hancock could fight that guy, not if he's become stronger since his fight with Luffy."

Hancock frowned at that, having read about that battle in the report on Luffy's abilities. "I think Robin and Franky could perhaps fight him, but that would give the plan away badly. Better we keep away from him if Doberman does return to the Archipelago."

Seeing that the two Straw Hat crewwomen were both still a little off-balance by that revelation, Hancock let her voice become sterner than it had been, pointing out to the main deck. "Perona, send out some ghosts to the east. There's another group of locals moving in our direction. Check what they look like and then drive them off. Nami, direct Chopper and Laki to us, or, if it would be easier, direct them to Shakky's bar."

"If they know the Grove they are currently in, then I can," Nami agreed, shaking off her shock at being given something more to do.

Since their mermaid friend had been stolen away, Laki and Chopper had been somewhat at loose ends, returning to the lower numbers, hopefully without drawing too much attention to themselves. After all, Chopper's disguise had been thoroughly ruined after he chased after the kidnappers. While the marines might not be quick to connect the reindeer monster man to the cute Chopper, the last thing the Straw Hats and their allies needed was for news of Chopper's survival to get back to the marines. Two survivors from their crew, two of the toughest? That almost made sense despite the odds they had been faced with. But a third? That was pushing it.

Hancock replied, "Do so," while her crew pulled a large tarpaulin from the gun deck. Several of the Kuja had been working on it long before they arrived at the Archipelago.

With Franky's help and Eve secretly pointing out areas they hadn't covered, the ship was quickly hidden away. Eventually, it looked almost as much like a part of the forest of mangrove shoots around it as the trees, both from the air and the ground. The water was a different story, but Perona, Robin or Hancock would be able to sense someone coming regardless.

As the work finished, Eve spoke from directly behind Nami, who had just finished directing Chopper and Laki to Shakky's bar. "Are you guys expecting me to be able to talk to this Rayleigh guy when he starts coating the ship so I can go under the water?"

Nami hung up the communications device, turning her head slightly to look at the mouth that appeared on the wall nearby. *Thank goodness she and Robin sound nothing alike and aren't into pranks... well, pranks on the rest of us, anyway. I don't want to think about what Robin and Luffy get up to. The two of them combined are enough to give me nightmares already, with all the appendages and bits of body parts appearing everywhere.* "I don't know. Do you think you would be able to show yourself to him? You haven't with any of the Kuja yet."

"I wasn't talking about appearing before him. I was talking about **talking**," Eve emphasized, a set of eyes appearing just to roll up in annoyance at Nami's answer. "Keep up, will you?"

"Hey, enough with the snark! It's been a weird day, and most of our crew just went off willingly into marine country. I'm on edge and out of sorts. Sue me!" Nami protested.

Eve giggled. "Aww, but I learned snark from you most of all, Nami." As Nami pouted at that, Eve expanded on her point. "As much as I love how you treat me like I'm part of the crew, I'm still a Klabautermann, and there are still some very hard and fast rules I can't get by. Rayleigh isn't part of the crew. I might be able to talk to... well, maybe Hancock and the two Kuja who help Sanji in the kitchen? They are the most... crewish..."

The ship's spirit seemed to falter a bit before going on in a somewhat irate tone. "See... this is the problem here. I'm not supposed to be part of the crew like this, interacting so freely with you all. I know I've said it before, but this is all so new! Anyway, what's important is I don't think I'll be able to talk to Rayleigh. I'll keep an eye on him, but actually communicating with him is beyond me. One of you will have to stay here."

Robin came over then, having reentered the bridge and seeing Nami seemingly talking to the wall for a moment and having just finished her part of putting up the tarpaulin. "That's been the plan all along, dear. Franky will be here to do that for you, at least, and you can talk with him. Hopefully between the two of you and Rayleigh's abilities, we'll be able to turn the Everlasting Resolve into a submarine in no time."

Eve's face appeared out of the woodwork, and a hand showed a thumbs up as she and Robin smiled at one another. Unbeknownst to Nami, the two surprisingly had the same idea at that moment. In both the preteen(ish) Klabautermann's mind and the adult woman's mind, an

image of a huge, almost cuddly-looking creature appeared. It seemed like a mix of the Everlasting Resolve and a shark. As the shared dream continued, it popped up out of the ocean, firing on several equally cutesy marine ships, sending them down into the water as chibi-marines were forced to leap off the ship to safety.

But Nami knew where Eve's real question came from. The Everlasting Resolve hadn't really had to do much for this expedition. Indeed, ever since Thriller Bark, the Everlasting Resolve had become a glorified people carrier rather than a ship of war. And like her, the majority of her crew was extremely combative. The purple-haired Klabautermann hadn't seen any action lately and was anxious to cause some chaos. So Nami patted thumbs up companionably, squeezing it gently. "Don't worry. You'll get a chance to shine at some point during this operation. I guarantee it."

With the spirit mollified, Nami and Robin exited the ship's bridge down to the main deck, where various tools, supplies and planking were being carried out from Franky and Laki's quarters. The plan was for Franky to get to work on the pirate ship for the Kuja now and then work on that in tandem with helping Rayleigh coat the Everlasting Resolve.

To the astonishment of both women, as well as many of the Kuja, Franky was already well on his way to building what amounted to a small makeshift drydock. Two mangrove shoots nearby were cut down, joining the remaining lumber they'd taken from the flying fish pirates floating dock. A flat dock had been created, crossing between the side of the grove the ship was pulled against to the one across from them in the small stream-like area, creating an area just above the water that was about as long as the Everlasting Resolve itself. A series of stairs led down to it, with a nicely ornamented railing.

As they watched, Franky held up a hand, seemingly to count on his fingers as he hammered something in on an axle of some kind. "And done." He looked around, scowling a little. "I don't like the fact that to use so much greenwood for flooring. And as for the ship, we will need to buy lumber for it. We didn't have enough on hand, although greenwood is okay for this setup. Not for the ship, though. No shipwright worth his salt would use greenwood if they didn't have to, let alone a super shipwright like me."

"You threw up that in the time it took us to put up the tarpaulin, and you're complaining it isn't as good as it could be," Marigold breathed, her normal antipathy towards Franky forgotten momentarily as she stared at his work.

"Bah, I'm still not happy with the finishing on that railing either. The design's good, but I think the coating could've done better," Franky answered, shrugging his head modestly. "It wouldn't be super if a man like me left any work like this undone."

But Hancock smiled faintly, hopping down and patting him on the shoulder, looking around thoughtfully. "This looks excellent, Franky. But remember, this isn't going to be a truly permanent vessel. We have money to burn, but..."

“HEY!” She was interrupted by an indignant shout from Nami above, and the orange-haired girl leaped down, landing lightly on her feet even though it was several stories from where the water was and where the ground of the ‘island’ of the grove was. Without pausing, she marched up to Hancock, growling angrily, “What is this ‘we’ thing! Just because we’re in an alliance with your crew doesn’t mean you can use **our** money that way! You and yours will get by with the cheapest ship Franky can possibly make for now until he can make you a permanent one on...”

“Luffy left me in charge of our alliance. He made no mention whatsoever of that, not including money,” Hancock answered, not gently, but not as harshly as she could have, while some of her Kuja looked on in anger at how Nami had talked to their Empress. “Further, recall that we might need my ship to engage the marines alongside my crew when we turn on them. And then get my crew out of there alongside the Everlasting Resolve. This ship needs to be able to fight and survive at least one incredibly sharp engagement. I’m not asking Franky to make a permanent ship for us equal to yours, not in so short a time frame. But it **must** be able to survive. And for that, we need to spend money.”

Laid out like that, Nami couldn’t argue with the necessity, and her anxiety-driven anger faded out of her quickly. Hancock surprised her then by patting her shoulder gently and leaning in to whisper in Nami’s ear. “I know what it is like to be poor, to have nothing. You then hold onto everything you can gather to yourself as hard as possible. But this is not the time to be stingy, and doing so will not serve your captain or the rest of your crew who have already gone into harm’s way.”

Nami blinked at that, looking down at her feet for a moment and mumbling an apology, never having had someone lay out the reasons behind her greed like that so easily. Hancock nodded firmly at her and continued in that same low tone. “Good. Do not question me again like this in front of my Kuja girl, or else I’ll be forced to punish you somehow, understood?”

Not waiting for the younger girl to reply, Hancock pulled back, speaking in a louder tone as she looked around at the start of Franky’s drydock. “Nami, since your disguise wasn’t spotted at all, I think you should go with some of my Kuja to purchase whatever Franky needs. You have always struck me as a good haggler, although you can correct me if I am wrong.”

You’re not,” Nami announced, now far more cheerful despite the double putdown. *And if this lets me get in some shopping, there’s no better therapy.* “Do you have any preferences for the Kuja to come with me?”

“Franky, do you have a list of what you need?” Hancock asked in turn, looking over at Franky.

The blue-haired self-made cyborg nodded, somewhat relieved that the navigator had been calmed down so easily by the Empress. “I’ve got the dimensions of the ship I want to build, and at least I know how much wood and nails we’ll all need after I’m done with the

drydock. Everything else will depend on what the local market has on hand. I'd like to go with you but know I'm too super to go in disguise."

With Luffy and Makino not there, she was the only one with any knowledge of disguises. Robin had never gone into them, preferring to run and hide or develop local scapegoats to use to cover her escape. Nami stared up at Franky thoughtfully before shaking her head. "Some big baggy pants and a sweatshirt could work, but wearing such a thing would probably bring more attention to you, and coupled with your size, that would probably be too much. We might be able to rig up some kind of beard or something, and that and a hair color change... Maybe."

Watching this from above, Robin was impressed by how quickly Nami had changed gears once Hancock had talked her down and how serious she was about it now. The girl needed a somewhat firm hand, but when given directions, she carried them out quite well. *Is this what people mean when they call someone a switch? I would be intensely amused if such a thing carried over into other areas of her life.*

"Nah. You all go on and meet up with Chopper and Laki. I've still got work here. We'll need cranes, a few stanchions, a whole mess of ropes to hold everything in place, and walls at either end of the drydock." Franky waved them off. "This was the quick part. I'll have a list for us to go and get after that is done."

Hancock nodded in understanding and leaped up towards the top of the cliff while Nami made her way up the stairs, commenting aloud for Franky's ears how nice the stairs and the safety railing were. The two joined Robin above, leaving Marigold in charge of security and Sonia helping Franky with the rest of the Kuja. Perona was also left behind, with Sonia watching her. The ghost princess's Hollows would be able to keep a lookout for the rest of the crew, while Hancock and Robin were away.

The three women made their way through the groves towards Shakky's bar, and once more, they found themselves accosted by groups of local morons. Evidently, the news of what had happened at the Auction House had yet to spread, something that Robin, who had been the one who was able to watch Zoro and Sanji being taken into custody by the marines, pondered, leaving Nami and Hancock to deal with the locals. Hancock did the same, letting Nami get some of her worries about the boys, Makino and Brook, out on the locals.

They reached the bar and found Chopper and Laki waiting for them, along with the Pappag, Hachi and Camie. The three merpeople still looked like they were barely recovering from their reunion. Hachi and Camie's shirts were marked by stains from crying, and Hachi seemed to almost cling to the green-haired mermaid. Evidently, Hachi felt Camie couldn't be kidnapped again if he just never let her out of his arms.

"I suppose he does have several to spare," Nami whispered to the other pirates around her. "Still, am I the only one who would like to see Camie be able to protect herself?"

Hancock and Robin exchanged a glance, nodding in unison. While each trio had, in the past, been protected and even rescued by men – Luffy, Fisher Tiger, Saul - all of them felt a little uncomfortable at how helpless Camie was if you discounted her speed in the water. “Maybe if we’re going to be here for a few days, one of us can try to teach her some self-defense?” Robin whispered.

“I will get one of my Kuja to do it,” Hancock decided, nodding firmly. “Rindo is an extremely good trainer and good with daggers, which Camie could carry easily underwater. Similarly, when you go abroad, I’ll need to pick out Kuja able to interact with men without reaching for a weapon. Several of them are very good hagglers, too, so they can help you when making deals. For now, I think we don’t need the three of them cluttering up the discussion.”

Hancock looked at Shakky, the former Kuja leader. The older woman, who had stepped down from the position as Empress in favor of Hancock more than a decade ago, was standing in the doorway, smiling at the reunion. “Let’s get inside and meet Rayleigh.”

Laki nodded as Chopper apologized to them again about letting Camie be kidnapped and almost throwing off the plan, his little eyepatch shifting to look like a sad face for a moment. But Robin waved that off, saying, “Frankly, Doctor-san, assuming any plan will go off without running into issues is ridiculous. And that’s even without Luffy being well, Luffy.”

“Robin’s right, and in a way, this worked out better. The plan originally only called for Zorro to be captured. This way, Sanji is with them too. That puts all three of our best fighters at the point of most danger to them and the plan,” Nami agreed before frowning. “Damn it, I’m being infected by Luffy’s attitude. I just had the thought that the plan is just as important as their lives. UGH!”

“Soon, you’ll be admitting our crew’s more important than our treasury,” Robin teased gently.

Despite smiling at their byplay, Chopper still looked a little down. He’d proven himself in the fights against the zombies and, before that, in the fights against the WeeGee lackeys. But he knew he was still one of the weakest members of the crew. Chopper had hoped to at least be able to guard Camie as she filled a lifelong dream and maybe to show off some of the training he’d gotten before the Thriller Bark debacle, most of which he hadn’t had the chance to use. And failing in that, which had been a mere sideshow to the crew’s real efforts here in the Archipelago, hurt a bit.

Shakky welcomed them all into the bar, grinning cheerfully. “None of us have told Rayleigh you’re here,” she said, grinning at Hancock. “I can’t wait to see his face when he recognizes you.” *And that doesn’t even consider the fireworks when he sees Laki. I’m looking forward to this.*

Hancock exchanged a smile with her predecessor, having also kept certain things from her allies about Rayleigh. Former and current Kuja Empress shared a similar sense of humor: they liked to surprise people occasionally.

Inside, the bar was empty save one man sitting at the bar, drinking from a bottle of whiskey that had been set on the table. By process of elimination, this must have been Rayleigh, Robin reflected. He was silver-haired and silver-bearded, his beard neatly trimmed, his hair shaggy and unkempt, a strange dichotomy. He looked about as tall as Sanji or Luffy but not as broad in the shoulders as Zorro, although he was obviously fit for his age, some muscles visible on his arms and under what looked like the sort of clothing worn by homeless people the world over.

This was a man, Robin realized, who could blend in or stand out at need. *And there is something else about him, perhaps the sense of a sleeping or lazy lion? One willing to watch the world go by, so long as it isn't personally bothered? Or perhaps doesn't see anything interesting? I wish I had seen anything happening inside the auction house. Camie's blubbling reports did not do this man justice...*

That wasn't really a mark against Camie. Robin actually quite liked the young mermaid. But it was plain that she did have the right mindset to keep cool in a crisis, and that somewhat bothered Robin, as did dealing with unknowns... while. Robin realized, worrying about her lover/captain who was haring off on her latest made scheme without Robin. *Hmm, perhaps it isn't just Nami who is out of sorts right now. It isn't the first time we've been separated, but the level of danger Luffy and the boys are in... no, I must concentrate on my part in this scheme. Trust Luffy's ability to adapt to see her and the others through.*

As Robin was thinking that, the man at the bar turned fully to face the group by the door, smiling at first in amused welcome. That expression froze on his face as Hancock entered after Nami and Robin, his eyes widening so that Chopper, following on Hancock's heels, wondered if they would just pop out of his skull entirely. "AHHHH!!! I'm gonna have to perform surgery to replace Rayleigh's eyes!!!"

"Wah, wahaha, not, not quite," Rayleigh coughed, getting control of himself while Hancock laughed haughtily, greatly amused by the first portion of the little surprise that she and Shabby had set up. "But, this is an interesting development, the Pirate Empress, here?"

Rayleigh recognized Hancock. But to see her here, now? "And with what I have to assume by Hachi's descriptions, are the rest of the Straw Hat Crew? I had assumed that something was being planned at the very least, given the interactions between that bounty hunter and Black Leg Sanji, but this? What in the world..."

Rayleigh stared at them silently for a moment, shook his head, then laughed. It was a deep, rolling, booming sound that caused both shivers to go up Nami's and the other's spines and smiles to appear on their faces. There was something almost wild and feral about that laugh,

like the laugh that Luffy sometimes used to deal with the Grand Line's craziness but amplified a hundredfold. "Truly, this is a world of wonders. I cannot wait to hear why you, Hancock-chan, are willing to work with a pirate crew led by a rookie and a male rookie at that. You must think you've got a lot to gain by doing so, and I must assume that rookie label is even more out of place than I assumed."

"So you presumed that Luffy was alive just because of interacting with Ranko the bounty Hunter and Sanji?" Nami was skeptical, crossing her arms and staring at the man. "I don't buy it. You're fishing for information."

"If I was, even asking that question and being so defensive would give me some, wouldn't it?" Rayleigh asked, then winked at Nami as she began to stiffen. "I've been in this game for a long while, my dear, both as a part-time information broker with Shakky and before that in my previous profession. I can read most people like open books, and I am rarely surprised."

He smiled over at Shakky, pulling her into a brief hug and kissing her cheek, which caused Hancock to nearly gag, not wanting to imagine their relationship or see any hint of it. "Thank you, my dear. This was quite a revelation, and I enjoy being surprised whenever possible."

Shakky smiled, but something about her body stance and the quirk in that smile gave the game away, and Rayleigh raised an eyebrow, understanding suddenly that the surprises were not done coming. And one, in particular, Shakky, was looking forward to even beyond Hancock's presence.

Unaware of how Rayleigh was suddenly looking for traps about to spring on him, Hancock simply smiled at the old man, one of the few men she had ever interacted with that she trusted implicitly. She had met him shortly after she and her sisters had been rescued from the Tenryubito by Fisher Tiger, and he had helped get them back to Amazon Lily. Since then, Rayleigh and Elder Nyon had exchanged information numerous times.

"Let me formally introduce you all. Chopper, Laki, Nami, Nico Robin, be known to Silvers Rayleigh, former first mate of the Roger Pirates."

For a moment, everyone was stunned. All that Camie had told them through Chopper and Laki's Den Den Mushi was the man's name, not the title.

But that title? The only one he hadn't heard that title before was Laki, although even to her, it sounded familiar. *Like something I heard when I was a toddler, maybe?*

She did know the Roger Pirates, though, as her former chief had mentioned them several times as some of the few blue sea dwellers he had gotten along with. The tribe had even hosted the strange group of pirates who had completely cowed both sides of the

Shandian/Skypiean conflict into leaving one another alone while on Sky Island. That wasn't even commenting on the fact that Gol D. Roger had left an inscription on the arch of the golden bell by the Poneglyph that made up a portion of its mass.

Even Chopper, who hadn't exactly been the best at gathering news about the world around him beyond medicine back on Drum Island, knew that name. The one-eyed doctor burst into his tall form for a moment, shouting, "The Dark King?! He's alive!? Why didn't you say something before, you jerk!"

"I am indeed, and I am sorry, Chopper, Laki, forgive an old man his secrets, hmm? Introducing myself becomes irritating after so long, and I quite like being addressed just as a normal person," Rayleigh explained. "And now, I am quite literally dying to understand how this strange tête-à-tête between a Shichibukai and a 'rookie' occurred. And where the 'rookie' in question could possibly be."

Nami, Robin and the rest could hear the quotation marks slipping into place in Rayleigh's voice even as he went on. "What little rumors we had of the Straw Hat Pirates said they were destroyed by an ambush by a Shichibukai, after all. If that's not the case, then where is he now?"

"Heh, now that would be telling," Nami quipped.

"In point of fact, you've already met him, er her," Hancock supplied, seeing no point in hiding that secret from this man.

Rayleigh blinked at that. "That requires an explanation."

With that, they all sat down and began to explain the alliance and everything else going on to Rayleigh. The idea of holding back information didn't occur to them, even Robin and Nami, who were not normally very trusting. But a man of Silver Rayleigh's reputation didn't need the information they were sharing to destroy them. And the fact that he was trusted not only by the merpeople, who had been escorted upstairs to have their own reunion there but Hancock, who spoke highly of him.

The explanation about Luffy's curse had Rayleigh laughing aloud once more, shaking his head as he repeated a phrase that had often passed Luffy's lips. "Only on the Grand Line, I swear! But with that... then yes, I think the infiltration aspect of your plan is quite feasible."

Rayleigh asked several questions about the plan in general but was more interested in how Hancock and Luffy had come to forge their alliance. By the end of the tale about the battle on Thriller Bark, he seemed to have picked up that their alliance was also built upon something more personal. If the twinkle in his eyes as he looked at Hancock was any indication anyway. Regardless, Hancock found herself blushing a little and looking away from him as that look came into the older man's eyes, determined not to meet his gaze.

But Rayleigh quickly let her off the hook, assuring them he would do his part. “I can cover a ship the size of a galleon within two days, although I’ll warn you, no normal vessel can catch up to the marine vessel, even if you use the coating system to go underwater. Marine vessels are quite quick over the long haul,” he then went on, wishing to help by pointing out what he saw as a major flaw in their plan, “Further, how exactly would you even be able to follow them in the first place? Do you have a Vivre Card linked to your Captain?”

“Nothing like that. We won’t follow the marines at all. We’ll just be going along the same route,” Nami said, holding up the Eternal Pose to Enies Lobby.

Rayleigh stared at it, shocked again, now at the audacity of the plan they’d put in place. “Amazing! It could go so badly wrong if they have to send another ship to Enies Lobby before Gisele and her ship arrives there, but even then, there’s nothing to link that theft to what is going on. Fantastic. A very adaptable, very well-thought-out plan. I quite like it.” Rayleigh’s lips quirked into a wry smile. “My former Captain’s plans were always more along the lines of ‘smash into something to see if it’s interesting, and if someone tries to fight or gets in your way, smash them too’.”

For a moment, Nami and Robin looked at one another, debating whether to ask Rayleigh questions about Roger, their journey, and most importantly, One Piece. It was extremely tempting to both women to know something about the journey ahead as they followed their captain to his eventual destination. Robin wanted to know quite desperately about the mystery of the Rio Poneglyph and what the message she had read up on Sky Island meant. And Nami was the type to always want to know information about the world around her.

But Rayleigh had already turned away from the Eternal Pose, his attention caught by Laki, who Hancock had introduced earlier. The presence of a Sky Islander wasn’t any big surprise to Rayleigh. He’d seen several of them pass through the Archipelago on various pirate crews, although this was the first Shandian he had seen down here on the Blue Sea.

But beyond that, there was something about Laki, her raven-colored hair, her small lips and the shape of her face. Rayleigh found his eyes locked on how she rolled her cigarette, took a drag on it, then blew it out before clamping it in her teeth as if Laki had a personal vendetta against the thing. Even how she leaned back in her chair and looked around at the others at the table reminded Rayleigh of something.

Moreover, her face, it’s almost like looking into a mirror... or rather a mirror and several memories combined into one image. Rayleigh looked over at Shakky, one eyebrow rising in query as his eyes flicked back toward Laki.

Shakky simply grinned, leaning against the bar behind her and taking a sip from her own glass, a bourbon Rayleigh knew she only brought out for specific events. That told Rayleigh that she knew precisely who Laki looked like and was anticipating his upcoming embarrassment.

Such a good friend she is... Well... tugging at his beard, Rayleigh decided to take a page from his former captain's annual on tactics: full speed ahead, take your lumps and hopefully come out the other side. *Although this time, I probably can't shoot back. Blast it.*

"I will do my part, then, as I said. You have this plan quite planned out, although escaping from Impel Down, even with a ship that can go underwater, will be far more troublesome than you might assume. Even I don't know where that prison is, although I do know that it is supposed to be somewhere exceedingly dangerous. But tell me, Laki, you are obviously a Sky Islander. From the Shandian tribe, correct?"

Something in his tone caused Robin and Hancock to sit up and look at him in confusion. Nami frowned, while Chopper looked clueless and kept eating a cotton candy that Shakky had prepared for him.

"That's right, your Roger Pirates stopped in with us. I hate to say it, but there aren't many of us alive from that time. The war against the Skypieans resumed the moment you all left. And those that didn't die in battle have passed on. Although I suppose you know our chief and one or two other oldsters."

"Undoubtedly, I do. But I wonder... you look very familiar to me. What were your mother and father's names?" Rayleigh said, inching his way forward despite his earlier desire to get this over with.

"My mother's name was Cara. My father was a Blue Sea dweller... actually, come to think of it, he might have been part of the Roger Pirates." Laki frowned a bit, then shrugged. "I've never made that connection before." She snorted then, holding up her cigarette. "Although I know I have him to thank for my nicotine addiction. He introduced the plant to my mother, and she started to grow and trade them to the rest of the tribe."

"Yes... Cara always enjoyed a good cigarette. I thought that was a proper gift when our crew was due to leave. Especially after she had been so helpful as we stayed with your tribe. I remember she was... short, yes?"

"No. My mother was always one of the tallest women in the tribe," Laki shot that down, frowning now. *I haven't thought of my mother in years.*

"Ah, yes, and she had short hair, done so that it curled at the ends. She always smiled, I think, especially at dawn. She loved the dawn." At that, Laki nodded, and Rayleigh continued with a faint smile. "And she had a mouth on her that could curdle milk if you crossed her. She was always the kind to keep others in line, and she had a brain too..."

"Yeah. I don't remember much about her, but my mother wasn't the type to accept fools lightly," Laki laughed quietly. "And she always encouraged me to use my mind, to

experiment with my Dials even as a kid. Mom encouraged me to follow my desire to be a warrior despite being a woman.”

“Yes, Cara was a free spirit for certain...”

Those words hung in the air as the penny finally dropped for Laki as to why Rayleigh knew all this and why he was bringing this up now. Her eyes widened and then narrowed as she took a long drag on her cigarette before clamping it in her teeth as she glared at the man. “Why the interest? Why do you know so much about my mother?”

“...Judging by certain resemblances in your face to mine in my youth, particularly the set of your eyes and their color...Well... I...rather think that you are...” Rayleigh stopped, unable to get the words out.

“Are you saying you’re my father? I want to be clear on this,” the Shandian woman practically snarled, reaching to her side where her rifle sat against the side of the booth.

“I...I am. Cara and I, well, we were there for quite some time as Roger and... one of our other crew members... worked on translating the Poneglyph there. And I was quite younger, and Cara was beautiful, and her attitude attracted me immensely. I won’t lie and say we were deeply, madly in love with one another, but er, well, passion can count for a lot...” Rayleigh trailed off hesitantly.

“I do believe at least some measure of a normal pirate’s inclination is at play here,” Robin murmured as an aside to Nami. “It’s a story that is a little too close to home...”

“He and Sanji must never meet. They might compare notes, and then where would the women of the world be?” Nami joked back in a low tone as they watched Laki for her reaction.

This reaction was, as should be expected, swift and violent. Laki reached down and grabbed her rifle, swinging the butt of it into the side of Rayleigh’s head. It could have been worse. She could have used one of her impact dials. But as her rifle was currently once more a work in progress, Rayleigh was saved from that fate at least.

The Dark King could have undoubtedly dodged or simply tanked it with his Busoshoku easily. He didn’t. Instead, Rayleigh took it like a man, letting the blow land and slumping sideways against the wall. Of course, this fooled no one.

Laki stood up, stared at him for a moment coldly, then turned and walked away, heading outside.

“Chopper, go with her. Make sure she doesn’t try to wander off too far. Although if anyone attacks, you probably could let her just get her anger out a bit,” Hancock advised. The little doctor nodded and raced after Laki quickly.

Behind the bar, Shakky was howling now, nearly collapsing with laughter, as Rayleigh pushed himself off the wall, mock glaring at her. "Laugh it up, Shakky."

"Thank you, I will," Shakky chortled. "I told you, I've been telling you for years! Sooner or later, one of the girls you slept with was going to show up here with her daughter or son with them. This is what you get!"

At that, Nami had a horrible fear and turned quickly to Robin. "I know we were joking about it a second ago, but Luffy did say that Sanji used protection at least, right?"

"Yes, I believe Sanji went and got Conis a pill, both before and after, I think? I must admit that my memory of that episode is not the best," Robin answered, staring at Nami, who blushed, looking away in embarrassment at how she had messed up on Sky Island to a certain extent.

Robin went on, shaking her head at Rayleigh and speaking up as she saw no one else was going to. "I think you'll have to apologize a few more times to her before she forgives you, Silvers-san. And I would not look to attempt to parent her. Perhaps some advice and training while we are here, but that is all."

Rayleigh stared at her, then over to Shakky, who nodded, her earlier humor slowly fading away as she shook her head. "I actually agree with that. You're not the fatherly type Rayleigh... maybe you could be to a young boy, but not even to a rough-and-tumble type of girl like Laki. On the other hand, you might be able to give her a lot of pointers about being a pirate or training."

"I have gotten the impression that Laki truly could use some hand-to-hand training. She seems to rely too heavily on her Dial weapons and her rifle in particular," Hancock advised.

That seemed to bring Rayleigh up with a snort. "BAH. No daughter of mine is going to have to rely on a weapon! I can give her some training while you all are here..." He sighed, shaking his head. "I can't say I ever really thought about having kids, but I am at least pleased that she finds herself on a crew like this and has the same wanderlust I embraced when I was younger."

With a sigh, he stood up, gesturing for the ladies to stand up with them. "For now, let me set my personal issues inside. I will want to start on coating the ship quickly."

Soon, the group was walking back with Chopper and Laki joining them, although Laki made a point of putting several of the others between her and Rayleigh, glaring out into the forest around them and now chewing on her cigarette in anger. For a time, the trip was silent, a strained kind of silence now, as everyone, bar Chopper, could feel the tension in the air.

Chopper did too, admittedly, but not as keenly as the others. *My biological family kicked me out and attacked me whenever I was around from the moment I ate the Hito Hito no Mi. In comparison, Rayleigh leaving this Cara girl behind isn't much. I figure family is the one you make.*

Deciding to puncture the tension, the little doctor ran up to Rayleigh, looking up at him with one eye, his eyepatch shifting to look like a star. "So, Silvers, sir..."

"Call me Rayleigh, please, Chopper-kun," Rayleigh answered, looking pained. *How is his eyepatch changing shape like that?*

"Rayleigh. So you were on the Pirate King's ship, right? So that means you went to Raftel and found One Piece?"

"I did," Rayleigh laughed, looking around to gauge the reactions of those around him. "Do you want to know what it is?"

Nami once more looked conflicted, remembering her earlier thoughts on this score. Robin also frowned before slowly shaking her head and falling away from Rayleigh. He still heard her, though. "We have read these words and will follow them... I will do the same, I think. I will follow my Captain and discover the secrets of the past for myself..."

Hancock shrugged, uncaring. "To me, the secrets of Raftel matter not at all. I have never wished to know what is there. I will help Luffy get to Raftel if need be, but whatever is there will matter far less than that he survives the journey to me."

Laki also spoke up, shaking her head, reaching down and bopping Chopper on the back of the head. "Hell no, don't listen to anything that old man says. After all, what would an adventure be like if you know what you'll find at the destination? The mystery, the romance would be gone!"

"Well said!" Rayleigh chortled, laughing at those words and grinning at his daughter, who looked flustered for a moment before remembering she was angry at him.

The group began to talk amongst themselves, the earlier strained silence no longer impacting them, although Laki and Rayleigh did not talk to one another. Rather, Laki and Nami moved away from the others, talking about weapons, filling one another in greater detail about what they had done since separating. Robin and Hancock stood close together, whispering under their breath about Luffy and what might be happening with him and the others, while Chopper and Rayleigh talked about Chopper's adventures, and Drum Island, Rayleigh having been there with Gol when he was younger. The fact he knew Doctorine was startling to Chopper, as Rayleigh was that the old woman was still alive.

They were soon back at the ship, where Franky was just finishing a third gantry. Several makeshift forklifts, simple weighted pulley systems had already been set up around the area. "This is quite impressive! Especially for having only a few hours to work with. Then again, I should expect nothing less from a former member of Tom's Workers," Rayleigh said enthusiastically.

"OW! You know Tom's Workers, old man?" Franky asked, posing momentarily as he looked up from his work.

"I do indeed. Gol and I both haggled with Tom on numerous parts of the design for Oro Jackson. And we never won those arguments." Rayleigh chortled, then did a surprisingly good impression of Tom. "BAH! You two would argue with a cake maker as he's making your birthday cake until it became time to blow out the candles! Until you sail it off, this is still my ship on my dock, and if you keep arguing, I'll kick your asses."

Franky guffawed even as tears began to rain from his eyes. "Bwaaahhhaaa, that sounds so much like him. He was the definition of SUUUUPEERRRR!!!" It took him a moment to regain control, and he looked up at the older man. "So, you're Ray...l...ei..gh..." He paused again, his eyes widening so much they could be seen from behind his glasses as he finally connected the dots. "The Dark King!?"

With Rayleigh now working on his part of the plan, the Kuja and Straw Hats went to work on their own various tasks. Later that day, Nami, Marguerite and Ran went out to purchase the parts Franky needed. Between them, they haggled for the various resources Franky needed. They had to keep on going out occasionally, as they couldn't transport enough in one go, and more than once, they had a close call with a group of marines. But thanks to Nami's acting skills and the disguises... and admittedly the fact Franky could keep his mouth shut... they were able to get away without causing any incidents.

Meanwhile, the Kuja and Franky began work on the Kuja's ship. By this point, even Perona knew what end of a hammer to use, and they rotated on and off the project, with Hancock and Rayleigh making certain no one came close with their Kenbunshoku.

However, after two days, the *Everlasting Resolve* was fitted with the coating system. This amount to a thin coating of the mangrove sap, along with three air devices to blow air underneath the coating, thus expanding it into a sphere around the ship. The system also included a series of weights and ballast that could help sink the ship and help raise it at need.

However, the *Everlasting Resolve*'s existing propulsion system had to be modified. Normally with Luffy busy, the ship could use one of two systems. The sails obviously were one, although it would limit the ship's maneuverability and speed tremendously, underwater as a non-starter. The second was the electrical engine, fed by coal the ship could take on. But coal, much like the paddlewheels that marines and a few pirates used, made smoke. Smoke rose

from the top of the ship's single mast, which was the center of the conning tower. Of course, you could burn something else, but there would always be the same problem.

So Franky and Rayleigh had to come up with an answer. There was no way the Everlasting Resolve could get to Enies Lobby in time to go through the Gates of Justice with Gion's ship under simple sails. Especially not underwater, where ships using simple currents could not go nearly as fast as a ship on the surface.

Franky was eventually able to devise a solution. Using a few dials, a valve on the smokestack connected to a signal device, and a coating bubble machine – the same machine that created the small bubbles people used to get around in the Archipelago – they created a second bubble device. This second device was set at the opening of the smokestack, where it caught the smoke in a separate bubble.

Eventually, this second bubble would pop from the growing coal smoke and pop, the smoke dispersing in the water. Before it did, the people on the bridge would know and activate the valve on the smokestack, closing it. A new bubble would grow from the coating machine. Once it was in place, Nami or whoever was on the bridge would reopen the valve, letting the smoke out into the second bubble above. It was not a perfect solution, but the only viable solution they could come up with wouldn't cause the crew to suffocate eventually or for the main bubble to burst.

However, working on this solution slowed the work on the Kuja ship. This was not a good thing, as the Kuja really did need a ship that could both get them home and then to Marineford within a week, or else Hancock would be in trouble.

Hancock had to make a decision then. None of the Kuja had the skill to finish the ship in time. So it was either go into battle with a ship that would barely be a platform for the Kuja's own fighting skills or keep Franky working at it and then keep him hidden going forward.

The Pirate Empress deliberated on this point for a while, but the fact was that the Kuja needed a ship that could fight. And while Franky could be a major help to the Straw Hats, he was the only one with the skills to build the Kuja a ship. "Franky, you will come with me. The Straw Hats need to get going, but they will need to do without you for a time."

Nami instantly protested this, as did Franky, the two of them speaking over one another. "Now, just hold on a minute!"/ "OY baka! I'm the shipwright of the Straw Hats. I can't just jump ship!"

The crew's gunner also objected, but she spoke from analysis rather than anger. "Hold on! Franky's made up the plans and everything. Your Kuja have probably learned enough to do a lot of the work. Let me stay instead. I'll fit in better with the crew, and when it gets time to load your ship with guns, I'll do just as good a job as Franky."

Chopper remained quiet, as did Rayleigh, here to observe what was going on. He noticed a strange feeling in the air of the room as if the ship itself was tensing at the idea that another member of its crew would leave it.

And yet, Hancock dealt with it at all their protests with cool dispassion. "Yes, lucky, you might be able to do as good a job as Franky would on the guns. But our as yet unnamed ship is only two-thirds built. And you all are running out of time! I still do not know how fast your ship can go, but neither do you understand how fast it can go underwater. You must be by Enies Lobby when it opens for Admiral Gion's ship to pass through. If you don't, you won't be able to catch the currents, and you won't be able to follow them to their next destination."

That halted the protests for a moment, but all of the crew were gearing up for more when Robin spoke. She had been silent through the protests, leaning back in her chair and thinking deeply. And when Robin spoke, it was something Franky and the others did not want to hear. "She's right. We need to get moving. But Nami is also right, and we would be very understaffed if you took Franky from us. Will need a few of your own crew to supplement."

Hancock thought about that, considering the fights to come, and then shrugged as she made another decision. "If Perona decides that she is done with moping after Zoro and tries to repudiate the agreements we made with her to join my crew, do you think you can handle her?"

Holding up a hand, Robin led her armor technique out for a moment, clenching it into a fist. "I believe I can. And I can see why you think she would be more useful with us."

"In that case, I believe we have an agreement." With that, Hancock stood up and left to get the pink-haired former ghost princess from the main deck. "I will also leave Marguerite with you as a cook."

For a moment, Chopper, Nami and Laki looked at Franky, who looked back at them. Then Franky shrugged. "Well, I suppose she's got a point. And Luffy did leave her in charge..."

"Agreed. " Just promise me that when we get back together, I'm there when you tell Sanji you went to Amazon Lily," Nami answered, sounding sour but ending in a more upbeat tone. "I cannot wait to see his face when he realizes you lived one of his dreams."

Hancock was not surprised that Robin followed her off the ship while Franky began to instruct Laki on how to operate the bubble devices. He drilled her on that for at least an hour, ensuring she understood everything. Especially the extremely finicky but necessary double bubble system on the top of the main stack.

After retrieving Perona, the two women and Perona moved well away from the rest of Hancock's crew and that of the Straw Hats. Finally, once they put several mangrove shoots between them and the continued work going on, Robin spoke. "The inclusion of Perona, I will

admit I hadn't thought of that. But her powers could give us a major advantage. Especially when it comes to investigating Enies Lobby. But we're not the only ones running out of time, are we?"

"No. I know precisely how long it will take me to get to Amazon Lily from here and even how long it will take to get from there to Marineford. We are running out of time for me to get there without causing suspicion. Which would be a very bad thing, remember? The last thing we need is more eyes on me and what might have happened at Thriller Bark." Hancock grimaced. "I can already envision the questions my fellow Shichibukai will try to ply me with. But if the Marines, particularly that old bag of bones Tsuru senses anything, it will not go well for us."

"I rather doubt that even Tsuru-chan would ever imagine Luffy's ability to turn into a woman," Rayleigh demurred. "I agree that both crews need to get moving. You've forgotten you must talk Elder Nyon into letting more Kuja join your group. If she protests..."

Hancock paused and for the first time in days, laughed in her previously patented, haughty manner, looking down her nose at Rayleigh so much she was staring up at the sky as she growled imperiously, "Hah! You don't know anything, Rayleigh. While she might be involved in gathering information on the wider world, it is I who command the Kuja! Nyon may squeal and scream but will follow what I say."

"Truly?" Rayleigh questioned and then shrugged as Hancock's pose did not waver. "Well, regardless, I think I will join you as well. I won't join this operation, but I can at least help Franky and you Kuja to build your ship. And keep Nyon company, as she has a heart attack."

That last broke through Hancock's hauteur, and she slowly nodded. "You have a point there, I will admit... Elder Nyon doesn't have the best health at the best of times. With this, and my decision to eventually switch loyalties... yes, she might really have a heart attack... oh dear..."

Robin chuckled at that but stayed silent until Rayleigh walked away, still chortling, towards where Laki was now being walked through the coating device by Franky. The father and daughter pair stared at one another, then Laki sighed and gestured for Rayleigh to take over from Franky.

This left Hancock and Robin to look at one another silently. Luffy's lovers, or rather one lover and one girlfriend (delineating where Hancock stood was hard) stood there in the shadows of the mangrove forest all around them for a moment, then Robin spoke. "Are you certain you will need Franky? More than we will?"

"Your role is the escape vehicle and possibly long-range artillery. My part in this may call for my crew and me to be up close and personal with the marines as I stab them in the back," Hancock answered, shaking her head. "I know that you and N..."

"I trust you," Robin interjected, causing Hancock to stutter to a halt, staring at her. But Robin simply looked back, smiling still. "I trust you. I will question your decisions at times, but I do trust you. Luffy did, so I will do the same."

Hancock found herself blushing for some reason, shaking her head from side to side. "Thank you," she whispered, shaking her head. "That, that means a lot to me. I will do my part, never fear. You and yours just be in the right place to help Luffy when the time comes."

"That goes without saying," Robin smiled back, trying not to look down Hancock's dress again. *Stop that! Ugh. Stupid Luffy and stupidly waking up my bisexual side.*

Soon enough, Hancock returned to the ship with Robin, exchanging a formal hug before Robin boarded the Everlasting Resolve. With Marigold and some of the other strongest members of the Kuja helping, the ship was soon poled out into the middle of the small stream between groves. There, Laki and Robin worked together to start the process of growing the coating on the ship, which slowly grew into a bubble encompassing it in every direction. A moment later, the floating bags were emptied, and the added weights at the bottom of the ship started to drag it down into the ocean.

Hancock stared after it for a moment, then shook her head and turned to Franky, who was watching the same thing beside her, big tears dripping from his face. *For a man, he tends to cry far too easily.* "Come, Franky, you have work to get back to. This is no time for you to be crying."

"Baaaaka, I'm not crying, baka, I've just got something in my eye, that's all!" Franky shouted, although he did turn and follow Hancock towards where the other Kuja was waiting.

OOOOOOO

Fire Fist Ace was in hell. Perhaps the very definition of hell, since Impel Down was built, as far as he could tell anyway, in the ocean and underneath it. Ace knew that the level he was currently on was the deepest, the sixth was set in the ground underneath the Calm Belt. And wasn't hell supposed to be under the earth? He wasn't exactly religious, so Ace wasn't certain on that score.

Regardless of his current circumstances, chained against the wall in a small, bare cage, staring out into the darkness beyond with nothing but the rants and ravings of his fellow prisoners to keep him company, fed the bare minimum to keep Ace alive, certainly matched what he would consider hell. But that wasn't what pained Ace the most.

No, what pained him the most was what his capture would cause. A direct conflict between Whitebeard and the Marines was inevitable, a war that would change the world regardless of the outcome. And probably not for the better. And regardless of which side won, people he knew, possibly people he cared about, would die.

Because of me. Because I overestimated myself and because of whoever cold-cocked me! Ace knew that Blackbeard was getting the credit for taking him down, but despite the amount of blunt force trauma he'd taken, Ace knew that was crap. And at times when he wasn't filled with guilt about what Pops and the rest were going to do because of his capture, Ace wondered who it had been. *I had him beat. I had Blackbeard on the ground, ready to finish him off, and then someone sneaks up on me and attacks me from behind!*

But as angry as Ace was at how he'd been ambushed like that, he knew it had been his own fault. It was Ace who had decided to go after Blackbeard without backup. And because of that, Ace had been so battered in fighting Blackbeard and his crew that whoever had attacked them from behind could do so easily. And it was Ace, a son of Whitebeard who had been captured and turned over to the Marines for their normal public executions spectacle. Whitebeard would never let that stand.

No power in the world's going to stop Pops from coming for me. That's bad enough, but what if Sabo or Luffy hear of it? Sabo's the only one who is... relatively sane of the pair, and he's a revolutionary zealot. If Dragon can sit on him hard enough and talk fast enough, he might convince Sabo not to throw his life away. It's doubtful, but it's possible.

But Luffy? No chance he won't jump in feet first, the crazy little fuck. And despite his bag of tricks, Luffy isn't ready for this fight! Even if the last thing I heard was that Luffy had taken out of a vice admiral near Alabasta, there's a difference between taking out one of those assholes and the real deal, like Aokiji or one of the others.

It wasn't the first time these thoughts had gone through Ace's mind since he had woken up chained to this wall at the deepest levels of Impel Down, but that didn't make it any less painful. Ace could only too easily see both of his brothers trying to ride in and save him. Both of them were smart enough to come up with a plan but smart enough to come up with a good one? One that had a chance of succeeding? No. Not even Sabo, with all his Revolutionary contacts, knew anything about Impel down.

That didn't even mention Whitebeard and the rest of his family, the losses they would undoubtedly take when fighting the marines. Win or lose, people he knew were going to die, because of him, because of Ace and his own pigheaded nature.

His brain caught in this loop, Ace suffered the jeers and shouts of his fellow prisoners in silence, uncaring of the world around him. The one other prisoner he could have talked to, Jinbe the Knight of the Sea, wasn't close enough to talk to without needing to shout over the voices of the other prisoners. Indeed, Ace had barely seen him arrive, and the two had only shared a few words before Jinbe was hurried off. Without his acquaintance to try and keep Ace's spirits up, with every hour that passed locked in his thoughts, Ace fell deeper into despair.

But then, a light came into the darkness of the sixth level, the flicker of a series of torches being carried by extremely nervous guards. At their head strode Magellan, the

massively built devil man, striding along the core door of the seventh level of Impel Down, his large hands clasped behind his back, his gaze straightforward. His face always reminded Ace of an ape he'd seen once for some reason, coupled with extremely sharp teeth and a thick beard. Like many of the other workers in Impel Down, he had bat wings and horns on his head, although Ace had no idea if they were real or not.

He spent a few seconds speculating on that, his mind grateful for something other than his own fuckups to concentrate on, as Magellan moved forward from the single entrance to the sixth level, a large elevator set in the center of the area. As he did, Magellan's black-colored suit and blood-red undershirt became clear enough to differentiate. His suit's buttons actually gleamed in the light of the torches, and the slim chain of gold across his pec also glowed, causing Ace to resent how clean the bastard appeared in comparison to his own dirty clothing.

Seeing their head jailer brought renewed hoots and hollers from many of the other inmates.

"Hey, Magellan! What're you doing, coming down here to slum with the scum?"

"Yo, venom fucker! How is your stomach doing these days? Still, giving you shits every time you have to use your power? What a fucking loser!"

"Who is that with you, some fresh meat? He looks tasty! Toss him into my cell!"

"Come on, Magellan, let me out for a little bit. I promise not to destroy anything you'll miss... much!"

So on and so forth the insults came, most of them nowhere near as intelligible or smart as those Ace could hear clearly. For all their power and cruelty, the individuals on level VI of Impel Down were mostly helpless here, although few would admit it. Shouting and screaming like this was the only way they could lash out.

Magellan quickly grew tired of their yapping and removed one hand from behind his back and held it out in front of him. His long, gauntleted fingers flexed, before slowly transforming into a purple sludge, sending fumes everywhere, causing the nearest prisoners to gag and scream for mercy. Such was the power of the Doku Doku no Mi. If you had to breathe, even the gas of the venom logia fruit would overcome you quickly. "Enough, rabble! I would never come down here just to listen to all of you yammer like the dogs you are. Stay silent if you know what is good for you."

However, some individuals down here had built up a certain amount of immunity and continued to shout insults at Magellan. He growled, his ape-like face twisting into a sneer as his other hand came around from his back, turning into venomous slime as well. That arm grew, shooting out into two of the cages, and the individuals within began to cough, choke and then

howl in pain as the venom fumes their lungs and venomed their bodies on contact. "I said, silence!"

Now everyone shut up, staring at Magellan, and he gestured with one hand.

Behind him, the guards guided someone forward. His face was covered in a hood, but his body was larger by several feet than the normal-sized guards, although still smaller by at least seven feet than Magellan, while he was just as wide in the shoulders. He was dressed in the typical black and white striped prisoner outfit, and yet, as he came close to Ace, Ace's eyes widened, latching onto a tattoo on the man's forearm, gasping in shock as he spoke aloud for the first time in days, his voice hoarse through disuse. "What the hell?"

He wasn't the only prisoner who noticed that tattoo. Another prisoner two cell doors down also gasped, while a third, situated several dozen cell doors away from him, yet who wasn't chained to the wall as Ace was, had come to his cell door to stare at Magellan. Jinbe, former Shichibukai and whale-shark merman looked on in utter shock. "Monkey..."

The other man, the one in the cell closest to Ace, was also shocked, although his hard, chiseled expression didn't show it nearly as much as Jinbe's face. "Well, now, has another powerful figure realized the stupidity of the system that we serve? Or was this a personal issue of some kind?"

Turning from where he had finished dealing with the other prisoners, Magellan stared into that individual's cell, shaking his head slightly. "Enough of that out of you, Shiryu. Whatever madness afflicted you was entirely your own. And it is only by my mercy that you live rather than be executed for your treason."

The man inside that cell didn't wear the normal prisoner's outfit. Instead, he wore an outfit similar to that of Magellan, bar the jacket and the hat. He was far more normal-sized, though, with a large chin, wide lips and narrow eyes set deep in his face.

The man addressed as Shiryu simply crossed his arms, staring back at Magellan with a faint smile. "Day in, and day out, we guard this prison of fools, mad men and murderers. The majority of whom are simply doomed to live out their lives here to repent or to die horribly. And you think I'm the crazy one? When I just wanted to make them pay quickly rather than torture them? I thought my idea was far better. We save money, time and sanity in terms of no longer needing to care for our prisoners, and they get the sweet release of death... and I got some fun at the same time. Really, what is the difference between that and what Sadie-chan enjoys doing."

"That was not your call to make, former warden Shiryu of the Rain!" Magellan shouted, his teeth bared, before shaking his head and turning away. "Toss the prisoner into that cell over there."

The guards were wearing gas masks as Magellan continued to pump out venom all around him, silencing the prisoners throughout the level. They now obeyed with alacrity, some of them able to hear the sizzling as the venom in the air began to eat into their masks, such was Magellan's anger.

Ace watched this through watery eyes, trying desperately not to breathe in but unable to reach his own mouth to cover it or his nose. Thankfully, Magellan ceased pumping out his venom, letting the gas it created slowly fade, pulled away by the interior certain air circulation system of the cell floor. He then moved to stand by the jail cell as his men hurried the prisoner into it, chaining him to the wall. But, like Shiryu, he wasn't fully tied to the wall. Rather he had only his legs chained to it.

"While I wished to house you in relative comfort up on Level One," Magellan practically whispered or whispered as much as a man like he could. It still carried to where Ace was, if only barely. "But while your rank and the respect I have for your previous deeds would merit that, your strength and your recent actions demand something different entirely. I'm sorry for this necessity."

"Don't be Magellan," a voice rumbled from underneath the hood, a voice Ace had heard thousands of times before, and he knew that his initial reaction had been spot on, something that made his eyes widen despite the venom fumes still in the air. This caused him to clamp them down, hissing at the pain hitting his eyeballs from the venomous gas while the voice went on. "I knew my actions had consequences."

Magellan looked uncomfortable for a few moments, a decidedly alien look on his face. "...I, I am still wrapping my head around the hero of..." He subsided, looking around. "Well, regardless, you will remain here until you die or the World Government decides you have paid for your treason. I hope they do so. One act of grief-driven madness should not offset a lifetime of loyalty."

The figure under the hood chuckled at that but shook his head, saying aloud, "Once you've turned traitor, the World Government never welcomes you back. You know that, Magellan. Now get out of here, or else Hannibal will have taken your seat again."

The large devil-seeming man grumbled a bit at that but nodded his head respectfully to the prisoner before turning aside, gesturing his men out before him, releasing another blast of venom toward a few of the prisoners who had begun to rouse themselves and shout further insults. Magellan kept the stream going as he moved towards the entrance to the level, the screams of his victims keeping the rest of the prisoners in line until Magellan and his guards reached the elevator.

For a few moments after the jailers left, the only sound in the area was the shrieking of Magellan's last three victims, but that quickly subsided. None of the other prisoners could tell

whether that meant all three had died or simply fallen unconscious from the venom. Ace doubted it, though. The prisoners down here were crazy strong, one and all.

The sixth level was where the World Government put prisoners they wanted completely forgotten about. Prisoners who were far, far too dangerous to ever see the light of day again. Once you were on Level VI, there was no coming back except going straight to the execution platform, as Ace knew would happen to him.

Ace led the normal jabber and shouts of the prisoners wash over the area while the new guy was heckled by several. He didn't respond, simply slumping onto a cot in his jail cell.

Finally, when the darkness and the silence of their target began to get into the prisoners' heads and they started to fall silent, Ace spoke. His voice was barely a whisper, but it carried it to the man in the cell across from him. *I gotta wonder why Magellan put him there. There are other empty cells nearby, but he went out of his way to put the new prisoner across from May. As a new way to torture me, maybe? Or to torture him despite his earlier words?"*

"What the hell are you doing here, G!" he practically hissed, biting off the last word before he said the man's name aloud.

The prisoner jerked his head in Ace's direction, and as Ace watched, he breathed in deeply. It must have been enough for him to get his teeth into his hood because there was a tearing noise a second later as the man tore a hole in his hood, then slowly pulled it off his head using only his teeth. As Ace had known, the face revealed was that of Garp, his so-called grandfather. Ace well knew the real blood connection wasn't anything as close. But even so, Ace had treated him like a grandfather after Luffy and Sabo pulled him out of what Luffy had called his 'emo stage.'

Garp stared across at Ace, then moved forward, leaning against the cell door. Only now did Ace see that he did have some kind of constraint on his hands. Garp's hands were clamped together in a specially created device that looked like a cross between a straitjacket and steel gauntlets. It covered his hands up to his elbows in formfitting metal while the straitjacket segment pulled his arms in a cross pattern back across his body.

Ace would not be surprised to discover those were made of Seastone rather than regular steel. The marine's means of gathering and working with Seastone were amazing. Ace knew that the only reason why they didn't try to weaponize it more often was the fact they would start an arms war, particularly with Red Hair and Whitebeard, both of whom had access to Seastone of their own, almost as much as the World Government.

"Please, please don't say you're in here because of me! I'm already dealing with enough guilt as it is," Ace nearly begged.

"Yeah, well," a pained look crossed Garp's face, unseen by any, although the pain in his voice was discernible to Ace as he went on. "You know what Luffy always said when you and he were younger. Family comes first."

Ace slumped in his chains, the earlier tension going out of him as he stared into the darkness of Garp's cell as a premonition began to fill him, something in Garp's voice hinting at something far worse than Ace being captured. "What, what happened to tip you away from the Marine side of things, Gramps?"

"Let's just say I went a little bit crazy..." Garp said with a snicker, deliberately misinterpreting the question as he began to remember the fight trying to figure out what to tell Ace.

Flashback

"Blood really is thicker!"

As his roar reverberated across all of Marineford, Garp hopped out into the air after Sengoku, then very deliberately twisted around, lashing out with his legs so fast that most of the marines on the training grounds or staring out of windows couldn't even see flashes. His legs just seemed to disappear for a second. Then the outer wall of the main building, the large wall that faced out into the center of the C-shape of Marineford, exploded under the impact of hundreds of Rankyaku slamming into it in various places, causing debris to rain down on those below as more blasted outward in every direction.

Many of the Marines within the building began to scream, shout and run away. Others, confused and frightened though they were, grabbed their weapons and rushed out of the various buildings around the C-shaped fortress that was Marineford. But as they caught sight of Garp, nearly all of them faltered in shock.

But one officer, a captain, galvanized them into action. "It, it must be some kind of mind control Devil Fruit or something! T, take him down, with lethal force if we have to! We can't fight someone like Garp without being serious about it! Spread the word. Get the officers out here!"

From where he was staring up at his former friend, Sengoku noted that and the man's face. If he could keep his cool under circumstances like this and even develop a story to feed the masses, the man would go far. For now, Sengoku had a former friend to try to get under control. He called upon his Devil Fruit power, growing in size as he did, wishing not for the first time that his power would let him change forms faster. But the difference in size was such that his Devil Fruit was among the slowest to call upon. *Thankfully, I can control the size, but to fight Garp, I need to be at least in my medium-sized form.*

Meanwhile, a few other officers within the building rushed out. One of the first out was Very Good, one of the Marines that had been with the Buster Call that Monkey D. Luffy had tangled with on Water 7. He gaped at the sight of Garp, the hero of the Marines, attacking the building and sending lazy attacks down at the people below. He instantly took command, shouting, "Marines, fan out and take cover! Your rifles will do nothing to Garp. All Captains and above take to the air, surroundAGGAH!"

A Rankyaku slammed into him, blowing Very Good into his berry bits while also dealing with another officer who had been right behind him coming out of one of the buildings. But others were also arriving from various corners and the ships surrounding Marineford. They all had the same first response: they simply paused, staring in shock. This allowed Garp to get in the first hits, and many of the Captains and Commodores who responded first were put out of the fight by a Garp Fist™ or a Rankyaku as Garp flashed around the air above Marineford. Luckily, Very Good's orders made a lot of sense, and the common marines concentrated on retreating, only a few trying to fire up at Garp.

Over the turmoil of the carnage he was causing, Garp's voice rose a bellow of rage, "A lie! The Marines are built on a lie! We have never stood for anything but the power of the World Government, no matter how much we lie to ourselves. What good is a World Government that allows slaves? What good is a government that orders assassinations of those kings and queens who disagree with it! What good is a government that doesn't allow its history to be taught, to...?"

Finally, Sengoku finished growing at the height he wanted, and he charged forward. Within a few steps, he had followed Garp to the west of where he'd been smashed through the main building. As Garp launched several attacks toward one of the four outer cliff-towers, Sengoku attacked. His form was three stories tall now, having turned entirely into his moniker of a Buddha. His skin had turned golden, beads had appeared around his neck, and his clothing had shifted somehow into a monk's robe.

He raised his palm towards Garp, lashing out with a strike so fast for all his size that it seemed to the watching Marines as if his palm had simply teleported forward to crash into Garp.

But Garp blocked it. He held up a single hand covered in Busoshoku, slamming his fist into the incoming palm.

"OOOWWWW! Curse you, Garp!" Sengoku bellowed in pain, pulling back his hand, the blow having caught him on his pinky and nearly breaking the finger. His other hand flashed up, but Garp dodged to one side and then danced into Sengoku's defenses using a mix of Geppo and Kami-E. A punch to the jaw sent the giant golden Buddha reeling, and then Garp fell onto one of his feet, crashing both feet down with punishing force.

Sengoku had time to call on his Busoshoku, so the blow didn't hurt much. But it threw him off balance, and the next second, Garp grabbed his legs, lifting the giant Buddha off the ground.

Sengoku found himself hurled into the side of the tower Garp had been attacking. He crashed into it, shattering several yards of raw stone, cracks going everywhere throughout the cliff face.

He looked up as a portion of the building far above Sengoku crashed down on him. His previously golden skin was completely covered by Busoshoku, so it didn't hurt, but Sengoku still shook his head as he pushed the rubble off him. "Well, this is humiliating. I forgot how fucking fast Garp can be. And how much slower I am in comparison. I have to be this size to have a chance of hurting him or at least herding him or become smaller and keep up... Fuck."

Still, Sengoku was undeterred and pushed himself out of the rubble easily. As he did, he breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that others had begun to arrive from elsewhere within the sprawling headquarters buildings.

The first officer to arrive on the scene who could make a difference was Chief of Operations Kong, along with John Giant and Onigumo. John Giant paused, shock written over his massive features as the first real giant to join the marines stumbled back, seeing the man who had recruited him wreaking havoc on Marineford. Onigumo and Kong didn't, charging into the battle.

Kong was an older man, older than Garp and Sengoku by ten years or so. He had previously held the position that Sengoku held now before being elevated into the position of overall commander of the World Government forces, both Marines and World Government specific forces. It was a vaunted post, but Kong had never removed himself to the Holy Land, preferring to remain within the headquarters of the Marines to better coordinate with them.

He was almost as tall as Garp but not quite as powerfully built. Still, he hadn't just held his former position due to his bureaucratic skills. He charged forward with Onigumo towards Garp through the air, bouncing around him for a second as the two traded blows. Even as Onigumo's swords shattered, and he fell back, Kong bellowed, "Stand down, Garp! I don't know what madness has got into you, boy! But I refuse to let you do more damage to the Marines than you already have!"

"Fuck you, Kong!" Garp shouted, grabbing at Onigumo.

When Busoshoku met Busoshoku, it came down to two variables. One, who was able to, in essence, fill his body with the Armor type Haki, and who, generally speaking, had more Haki to spare. The first wasn't easy to understand, but essentially when someone first started using Busoshoku, they covered their body with it, like a second skin. But as you progressed in mastery, that changed to imbuing your entire body with it. Not just your skin, but the flesh

underneath, the bones and muscles. This not only made one stronger but far tougher. And as a pirate named Don Chinjao had discovered, Garp had mastered this aspect of Busoshoku to a point only a handful could match.

The second aspect, of course, was easy enough to understand: the greater person's willpower, the greater their Haki reserves. And no one had ever said that Garp lacked willpower.

Despite Kong's best efforts, Garp broke through Onigumo's Busoshoku with horrific ease, the blow shattering his ribs and hurled him out into the ocean beyond Marineford.

The younger, far weaker Vice Admiral dealt with Garp turned on Kong, pushing him back through the air and away from Sengoku, forcing the Buddha to charge after him. "My entire life, my entire goddamn **life** has been devoted to the Marines! I closed my eyes, looked away from the evil we've allowed, and then, you and those fuckers in the World Government decide my grandson, through no fault of his own but being strong, is a danger! One you all had killed!" Garp bellowed between blows, the two of them dancing around up, down and to the side of where Garp had started his rampage.

"What? All this because of Straw Hat?" Kong was utterly mystified, trying to understand the other man even as he exchanged blows with him. "Even if you are related, he's a pirate! You've never commented on our anti-revolutionary stance!"

"My shit heel of a son is more than old enough to look after himself! And his revolutionaries are the very definition of picking a fight with the World Government," Garp snarled, starting a bit by the accusation that he didn't care about his son either. He did, but Dragon and he had long reconciled that they were on opposite sides. And Garp had never been personally called in to fight the revolutionaries. "But Luffy? He never went out of his way to pick a fight with either the Marines or the World Government. It was always the other way around! And because he did a damn good job of it, you people ordered him killed! For being more righteous than us!"

Kong was good and massively experienced. But he didn't have as much experience as Garp, nor was he as fast or strong. Without someone else to support him, a blow quickly got through his defenses, which rocked his head back, and then, Garp was diving underneath them, grabbing at one of his legs.

A series of blows to the side of his leg nearly broke through the older man's Busoshoku and would have crippled him if not for Sengoku rejoining the battle. "Air Cannon Palm!"

Garp grimaced as the blast of compressed air slammed into his side, hurling him away from Kong and breaking his grip on the other man's leg. The strike bounced him across the series of crenelated towers at the center of Marineford to crash into one of the cliff towers on the other side. But then he was kicking off it, heading to his right.

This put him above portions of the town that had grown up throughout Marineford. He grinned evilly as he shouted, "Doflamingo is a Tenryubito! He's also the marine's way of contacting the Emperor, Kaido!" Garp shouted. "We Marines don't just keep the peace. We keep the underground going to feed our coffers!"

More secrets followed. "The World Government has committed at least a thousand and forty **murders** over the past year, murders of **innocent** people who knew too much. Killed by the World Government's orders, the assassins transported on marine vessels! And that's only the ones I know about!"

"Fuck!" Kong growled as he raced towards the younger man with Sengoku beside him. The image of the giant, quite obese buddha bouncing through the air should've been hilarious, but the glare on his face and how he was clenching his knuckles ruined it. "What the hell is he doing?!"

"Garp has always been way smarter than most people would give him credit for. He's not looking to hurt us physically. He's looking to undermine our morale! And he's been around for so long, he knows a lot of secrets he really shouldn't, including operation Underground Dragon."

This was the operation the World Government ran to keep tabs on Doflamingo and to keep communication with him open. And through him, his other major connection, the Yonko Kaido. There were numerous reasons for this, but one of the chief reasons was that Kaido had conquered the land of Wano. The samurai country had turned back the World Government several times before Kaido snuck in and was the only country where the ability to read ancient script was still taught. Something the World Government wanted to stamp out in the extreme.

So long as that was going on, and Kaido kept antagonizing Whitebeard, Shanks and Charlotte equally so that no peace could be made between the four Yonko, anything and everything Doffy did, or Kaido did on Wano Island, was fine by the World Government. The ends always justify the means to the Gorusei, and Kong agreed with that philosophy.

Of course, that didn't mean that such secrets could be shared. Particularly not with the low-ranking Marines, their families and whatever civilian secretaries and office workers were around the place.

"We have to stop him!" Kong growled.

Before they could close, other help arrived first. This came in the form of ice flashing out from one of the buildings. It covered several buildings and battlements between its starting point toward where Garp was now standing on battlement battering aside Momonga, who looked absolutely stricken and the recovered John Giant.

Garp looked over at the ice coming in, then snarled, "You think your little ice will be enough to hurt me, brat? I thought I taught you better than that, Kuzan!"

His blow shattered the ice coming towards him and created a shockwave racing toward the individual who had created the ice. The ice image Aokiji had conjured shattered, and he rose out of the ice nearby, reaching for Garp. "Mah, mah, you need to calm down, Garp. Racing around like this can't be good for your heart."

"My heart's already bleeding. I just want to share the pain!" Garp twisted his arm, dodging Kuzan's touch by a centimeter before his arm became covered in Busoshoku again, and he lashed out. But Kuzan had already pulled his consciousness away back down into the ice, and Garp's blow only shattered another ice statue. Garp used several of the shattered chunks as weapons, hurling them up toward John's face causing the giant to fall back.

Garp leaped into the air, moving to attack John, but the vice admiral was saved by Akainu as he arrived on the scene from his personal flagship out beyond Marineford. The magma user's entire body had shifted into magma. He stared as Garp calmly caught his fist, his fingers and hand black with Busoshoku as he completely ignored the heat of the assault.

And unlike Kuzan, Akainu wasn't quite fast enough to try to build himself into a mountain of magma or something similar. He had launched himself forward as a man, turning into magma midair.

From down below, Kuzan looked up, one eyebrow rising in amusement even as the ice wielder began to create a series of mountains of ice jutting toward the combatants. "It was then he knew that he fucked up..."

From above Kuzan, Akainu gasped in agony as his magma form proved no detriment to Garp's Busoshoku-covered fists. Ribs cracked, and he was hurled backward through the air like a fiery shooting star to crash still in his magma form into a third of the cliff towers. So hard was the strike his hit rattled the whole tower, and bits of it began to crack, sloughing away from the side of the tower even as Akainu tried to turn into his magma.

Then, Kong and Sengoku were on Garp, the two coming in from different angles, catching him between them. Blows finally began to get through to Garp, real ones that slammed into his Busoshoku-covered form, slowly starting to chip away at his strength and willpower.

But this was Garp, hero of the Marines. The man, who had, for all the world knew it, chased the Pirate King to the ground. Despite being attacked from both sides, he dodged as many blows as he took and still shouted a few secrets that Kong and Sengoku would have preferred to remain such.

Finishing one such tale about the deal they had made with former pirate Redfield, Garp suddenly changed tactics. Before this, he had been bouncing away from Kuzan, who was keeping his distance, lashing out with ice attacks and occasionally trying to close to touch Garp to use his Ice Time technique. But thanks to his admittedly limited Kenbunshoku, Garp was one step ahead of him, leading the other two higher into the sky, leaving behind the lower-ranked officers.

Now, he blocked one blow from the Sengoku and flipped himself over that blow instead of simply blocking it. Sengoku's ears rang as a punch took him in the side of the head despite his own Busoshoku, and he could then feel Garp using his back almost like a slide, fending off the fists and feet of Kong who had followed even as Sengoku tried to twist around, tried to bring his hands to bear again.

Then Garp was rolling underneath a blow from Kong, turning himself into a miniature cannonball as he somehow pushed himself down and off the air into a faster form of Geppo. Slamming into the top of a battlement far below for all the world like the world's largest cannonball, Garp scattered several dozen commodores and higher-ranked officers, waiting to see if they could do anything to help their own side. Garp himself smashed through the top of the battlement into the tower below.

Among the officers were Strawberry and Dalmatian. Both rolled with the concussive force of his landing, getting their feet under them and charging forward, weapons raised. A few of their fellows, even other vice admirals, weren't so lucky and had been smashed off their feet. None had taken real injuries bar two captains who shouldn't have been there and Vice Admiral Catacombo, who had been too slow to call on his Kenbunshoku. A large stone caught him straight in his face, ruining his nose and knocking him out.

Now Strawberry and Dalmatian charged down into the hole.

"Surrender Admiral Garp! For all the respect we...," was as far as Dalmatian got before Garp was on him, grabbing his face in one hand, his weapon in the other, shattering it. For all his speed and skill, the far younger vice Admiral was a child compared to Garp. He found his head slamming into the ground, only his Busoshoku saving Dalmatian from an ignominious end. His neck was still nearly broken, and his brain badly concussed.

His companion Strawberry came in Busoshoku from head to toe, including his swords, which flashed towards Garp. Cutting force met blunt force, and his swords were propelled away, but they stopped Garp's attack on Dalmatian.

Even as the others followed them down into the hole, Garp turned, smashing his way out of the side of the tower and back out into the open. The two of them fought Garp for a brief few seconds alone midair finding their Busoshoku almost overcome in a few blows by the older man. Thankfully before they could join Dalmatian in unconsciousness, Kuzan arrived on the scene, freezing the ground under Garp forcing him into the air. He couldn't block the series

of air cannon, and leg strikes Garp sent out, though, and several of the marine vice admirals found themselves blasted off their feet and into buildings. They weren't hurt, but Akainu somewhat ruefully acknowledged they weren't contributing to the fight either.

Seeing that even as he dodged a blow from a somewhat recovered Akainu, Garp began to laugh. He danced around the rest, closing hard with Kuzan, then bouncing away, lashing out with several dozen Ranykaku and their fist equivalent into buildings and the area that Kuzan had covered with ice.

Kuzan stared in consternation as the buildings he had frozen now shattered, turning into so much rubble. "Well, I didn't see that coming."

This cost Garp, though, as a palm strike from above him caught him on the head, sending him slamming down into the ground. But Sengoku's attempt to keep Garp pinned there failed, and he pulled his hand back, grimacing in pain as Garp's retaliatory blows had nearly overcome his own Busoshoku.

From then on, Garp didn't try to fight the marines as much as he attempted to do damage to Marineford. He tried to avoid Kuzan, Akainu and the other main combatants. Instead, he took on numerous other marines for a time, including two of his newest protégés, Coby and Helmeppo. They finally arrived from his ship and the rest of his crew to try to talk Garp down. But their shouts went ignored as Garp didn't even look in their direction. They might be his current apprentices, but Luffy was his grandson.

The fight continued for what seemed like hours to those involved, during which most of Marineford had been wrecked in some fashion, and several vice admirals were knocked out of the fight due to ill luck or simply Garp's Busoshoku being so much better than theirs. Most of the other officers below that level had retreated, and even the better fighters like Kuzan and Akainu were sporting wounds.

But Garp too was starting to run out of steam. A combination of Hina using her cage, the danger of Tsuru's touch, and the two Logia users in Marineford currently had finally begun to corral Garp, to the point where he could be battered under by the vice admirals, Kong and Sengoku. They were still taking losses, but if Garp had wanted to just get away, he had blown his chance now.

Coby watched as Garp was finally slammed to the ground, his eyes wide. "What, what is going... Why?! Admiral Garp, why! Why all this!"

Garp dodged a blow from Kong, grabbing the man's arm and bringing his other hand up and into it. The battle had gone on so long that Garp wasn't the only one who was losing the ability to keep his Busoshoku in place, and from the start, his use of the technique had been just better than anyone else's, not being the skin-deep variety most used.

Kong couldn't react in time, and he cried out in agony as his arm was broken, the bones underneath his Busoshoku-covered arm shattering as a booming sound filled the area. Kicking Kong into one of the other vice admirals and dodging so that Kuzan and Akainu's next attacks crashed into one another, Garp appeared out of the steam this created, slamming both of his fists into Sengoku's massive head, causing him to stumble back into John Giant's legs even as both of Giant's massive hands slammed into Garp from either side pinning in between. The next strike got through Sengoku's Busoshoku, shattering his leg and then his shoulder, putting the Buddha out of the fight at last.

Akainu caught Garp in turn with a blow to the back, which burned through his clothing, Garp's own Busoshoku failing, but the man simply turned, taking the burning from the blow, his body tough enough to nearly ignore it despite the lack of Haki. Akainu groaned as his return blow caught Akainu in the jaw, shattering it.

But Garp had stayed put for too long. Even as Akainu fell back once more, Kuzan's ice rose all around Garp. He rose to one side, grabbing Garp in a bear hug. "ICE TIME!!"

Garp still struck back, Busoshoku laced fists catching Kuzan despite his last-second attempt to disappear into the ice all around Garp, the blow aiming to where he had shifted his consciousness so fast Aokiji was completely blindsided. Aokiji found himself smashed into an underground cellar, his arm below the elbow more bits of bone than a real working limb. "FUCKKKKK!!" Kuzan howled in agony. *Even after such a pounding, his Kenbunshoku is still better than mine!? I didn't even sense the blow coming!*

But before Garp could get away, John Giant's hands caught him, equally covered with Busoshoku. So pinned, the vice admirals started to wail on him from every side.

Even so, Garp still shouted at the watching marines, his Busoshoku fading only slowly under the pummeling. "The Marines have never stood for justice. The marines have never stood for anything but follow the damn leader! Stop obeying orders blindly, and stop believing those above you have a better idea of justice than you do! They don't. It's all a lie, a lie!"

Then, Tsuru leaped up onto Giant's arm, reaching forward. Garp desperately tried to pull away but clad in John's grip and weakened from the fight up to this point, he couldn't. "You arrogant, bloody-minded old bastard! You've done enough talking for one day!"

Her Devil Fruit powers activated a second later, turning Garp into a sheet. The next second, he was being pulled out of the giant's grip in Tsuru's, still carrying the human-shaped cutout that had been the hero of the Marines.

End Flashback

Even as his mind flashed back to that battle, Garp didn't tell Ace all the secrets he had been spouting in between. And he certainly didn't tell Ace that Luffy was dead or that his death was the catalyst for Garp turning on his beloved Marines.

But Ace was many things. Stupid wasn't one of them. He stared at Garp even as the old man's tale finished, shaking his head in anger and growing concern. "You're holding something back, Gramps. It wasn't. It wasn't me being imprisoned in here that caused that tirade. And there's only a few things that could have been. What, what happened to my brother?"

In the background, catcalls and jeers began from the other cells. Several of them had been close enough to hear or even see through the darkness and realize who the new prisoner was. And since several of them had been put here by Garp, their reaction to this news was hardly a surprise OR printable.

Over the rising tumult of the other prisoners shouting challenges, derogatory digs and laughter at his expense, Garp still heard Ace's question. Sighing, he slumped against the bars, shaking his head slowly. "That, that's what the final straw for me, Ace. I didn't know the details until after, but I heard they'd killed Luffy. They, they sent three Shichibukai after him. Don't ask me why. That story is too damn convoluted to get into right now, and I'm getting tired as it is."

He shook his head once more sorrowfully. "Luffy fought hard, I don't doubt that. But so early into his career, even Luffy would've been overcome by those odds. And one of them survived to report that to Tsuru, that bitch."

Any friendship he might've felt for her or the rest of the Marine High Command was gone now, burned away in his rage and what they had done to his grandson. Garp had never been the kind to hold a grudge before this, but he was certainly holding one now. "I... I'm sorry, I don't have any details, but it's known Luffy was dead before the Shichibukai turned on one another."

In the darkness of his cell, Ace felt tears forming in his eyes as he began to sob quietly, unseen and unheard over the rising tumult at Garp's presence.

OOOOOO

Of course, the trouble coming from Garp's rampage didn't end with his being taken down. And even from where they were laid up in Marineford's medical wing, it fell to Sengoku and Kong to deal with the fallout. While Aokiji and Akainu recovered in silence nearby, Kizaru was assigned to deal with the repairs of the fortress and handle the turmoil among the lower ranks. Meanwhile, Tsuru took over the day-to-day running of Marine operations. This left Sengoku and Kong to argue vociferously about what to do from now on.

The first choice they had to make, or rather the first decision, was easy and the only one they didn't argue about. They had to postpone Ace's execution. Originally, Ace's execution was

supposed to occur three days after Garp's rampage. But the Marines had simply lost too much of their combat power for that to occur between the loss of two Shichibukai and six vice admirals being out for the long term, to say nothing about the lower ranking officers that Garp had dealt with so easily.

The Vice Admirals were really the only ones whose loss they could ill afford.

Dalmatian might well never recover without significant brain damage. Cancer, Mozambica and Onigumo would need weeks, if not months, to recover from their wounds, mostly shattered ribs and internal lacerations. Onigumo even had a punctured lung but had been saved by the quick thinking of some of his subordinates and Very Good, who had been able to follow his trajectory as he was hurled out to the ocean and rescue him before he sank. Bastille had needed surgery on his face to remove bits of his mask. And even one of the Giant Squad, vice admiral giants who had trained under the older John, was down. Lonz at least would recover quickly, but seeing his leg get shattered in several places had done nothing for the younger man's confidence.

One of the Marines who handled the public relations department was called to discuss how to spin public perception of the postponement hours after Garp had been subdued. The man looked a little glassy-eyed with shock, and well he should. The shock of Garp's treason would reverberate through the Marines for a long time.

Indeed, Kong was secretly wondering if he would have to have many of the younger seamen who had heard Garp's shouts executed. He had already ordered their officers to clamp down hard on any questions about what Garp had been saying. They had all been lies the 'mind-controlled' Garp made up on the spot. If anyone questioned that, tried to search for more information, or felt that their sense of justice superseded that of the Marines? Well, after Ace's execution would be the perfect time to make such people disappear. They would simply become casualties of the war.

This included Garp's two most recent protégés and Hina. All three of whom had begun to ask questions even during the battle. For now, they would be watched for treason, though Kong doubted any would act against the marines. Not with Ace's execution coming up and the importance of that event.

The young man with the shocked expression still painted on his face nodded at the fact he would be giving the newspapers a report on the postponement of the execution. "And sir, what should we give as a reason for the postponement?"

Kong growled a little, shaking his head. "We don't have to tell them anything! Did we tell them the date of his execution when we first announced the news of his capture?"

"I would have to look back to tell you precisely, but I believe we did, sir. And um, it is always best to say something, to give the "

“And we’ll have to contact the Shichibukai as well. Unless you think we want them here in Marineford just waiting around,” Sengoku grumbled from his bed nearby.

Since all four of the highest-ranking injured were sharing a room, the snarl from Akainu’s utterly mangled mouth was clearly audible to everyone in the room. And it needed no translation.

“True, blast it. Very well, we will...” Kong paused, and then, some of the ‘lies’ that Garp had spouted returned to him. “We’ll make it so that the public knows that a group of Tenryubito wishes to view the execution. Make a big deal about it, make up some saint or other and make it personal!” The older man grimaced a little. “That will make it clear that we had nothing to do with the execution being moved back. And, if we convey our anger on that score subtly to the Shichibukai and through internal lines of communication that we know Whitebeard’s broken, we might even be able to cover this up entirely.”

That was the good thing about the world being the way it was. News didn’t travel between islands very well or openly. Public perception then could be easily influenced via a few outlets.

“But with that in mind, no Marine currently stationed within Marineford can leave. We cannot allow the morale of our fellow marines elsewhere to be affected by Garp’s treason,” Sengoku added grimly.

He looked down at his thoroughly bandaged body, shaking his head. *I knew that Garp was powerful, our best fighter. But I hadn’t realized that my own combat skills had faded so much. If I wasn’t thinking of stepping down after this war with Whitebeard is concluded, I would be now.*

The PR officer had taken several shocks to the system that day, and being told he was about to lie to the public about something like this barely registered after he had seen Garp, his personal hero, attempts to demolish Marineford from one end to the other. So he simply nodded, then said he would talk to Great Staff Officer Tsuru before he put anything to paper permanently but that the new story would go out on the evening albatross.

Several hours later, Kong and Sengoku were still arguing about how to regain some of their lost military strength.

Kong wanted to build more Pacifistas. None had been within Marineford as Garp rebelled, and they might have made a difference against him. Despite the Doberman model’s ignominious demise at the hands of Eustass Kid, they were a tremendous game changer. But to do that quickly enough so that the date change didn’t go on too long to be explained away without rumors that would harm the marines – or far worse, Whitebeard would realize how the marines had been weakened – the World Government would have to bring in still more companies and laboratories in the Holy Land to do it.

But the last thing that Sengoku wanted was for the Tenryubito to be able to build cyborg soldiers like that. He could all too easily see those little monsters fighting amongst themselves. Just because the Tenryubito were revered by the World Government didn't mean there weren't factions or cliques among them. Nor did his official position on them mean that Sengoku was blind to the nature of the people under those fishbowls.

Instead, Sengoku wanted to bring more officers into the Marine Corps. There were several mercenaries, local government officials and royal bodyguards with extreme combat potential they could bring in to bolster their forces, some of whom were even logia users. Indeed, Sengoku had already been thinking along those lines, given that Gecko Moria and Bartholomew Kuma had been slain taking out Garp's grandson. That, and sending to Drum Island and their revered Isshi Twenty to quickly get the wounded back on their feet.

But Kong didn't want to rely on these third-party individuals... beyond the medical experts anyway. They were the only way Akainu might ever talk again or Aokiji and Sengoku be ready to fight in some fashion in time to join the war. Even with the Tenryubito lie working for them, there was only so long they could postpone Ace's execution without looking weak. And even with the Isshi Twenty helping, it was very doubtful that any of them would return to one hundred percent.

Regardless, there was always the chance of newcomers like Sengoku was speaking about to break under pressure and flee. Moreover, bringing them into a fight that both men knew would be extremely hard, even with all their home-field advantages, would increase that chance tremendously. "Besides, we know that Whitebeard is popular even beyond his territory. We've got our own insiders among his allies, we don't want him to sneak some into our ranks," Kong argued.

This debate went back and forth, with both men pointing out specific problems with one another's point of view, specific issues that Kong knew had come up with a few of the people that Sengoku wanted to bring in, and Sengoku pointed out specific conflicts within the Tenryubito. Eventually, it was decided to compromise. Orders would be sent out for nearby officers to recruit several of the most promising local police officers or government officials into the Marines. Meanwhile, Boa Hancock and Doflamingo would be ordered to bring their crews to Marineford at the appropriate time. While in the main, the Kuja were only barely above captain level, if that, Hancock's sisters were at least at Commodore level, if not vice-admiral. And Doflamingo's crewmen included several monsters above the vice admiral level. And finally, the number of Pacifistas and Dogfists would be increased by five more of each variety.

The next day, even as those orders went out, and Tsuru personally communicated with the Shichibukai about the change in plans and Hancock and Doflamingo's specific additions, Sengoku looked over at Kong. "You do know that this will make the Shichibukai have almost as much of an impact on the battle as our own Marines? Even with all our levers on both, I'm not exactly pleased by that."

Indeed, Sengoku was extremely leery about it. None of the Shichibukai were individuals he would trust for us that he could throw them without using his Devil Fruit powers. The only one whose word could be guaranteed was Mihawk if he gave a specific oath anyway. *Or Jinbe, but he's in Impel Down for arguing about our plans on this score. Mihawk, well, so long as the task you give him doesn't bore the man, he won't wander off.* That was the best you could say.

Both men were entirely dismissing the lower-ranking marines. While many pirates of the commodore or vice admiral level could be overcome by numbers, that would be at a very steep cost.

Kong frowned but nodded his head seriously. "True. Let me think about that for a time. There might be... ways... ways that the World Government can pursue that the Marines cannot to keep them under control. Ways that might help further in the future..."

At that, Sengoku shrugged and decided he didn't want to know what the older man was thinking. So long as they could defeat Whitebeard and have Ace's execution go off without a hitch, he would be happy. *And I can look at it this way. All the hitches seem to have occurred before the actual war with Whitebeard. After all this, the actual war might well go precisely as planned. Yes, that thought will at least let me sleep soundly tonight...*

OOOOOOO

"... Princess, did you read the news a few days ago, Maah, Maah?" A very large, curly-haired man asked, his voice almost musical.

The woman he addressed was a teenage girl that the Straw Hats knew extremely well. Indeed, they both knew Nefertari Vivi and the first person who spoke, the majordomo of the royal palace in Alabasta, Igaram. Although perhaps they might have been startled by the changes that had come over Vivi in the nine months or so since they had left the desert kingdom.

Her hair was shorter than it had been, cut to just below her shoulders instead of so long it nearly trailed down to her rear when loose. Her skin was slightly more tanned. And there was visible muscles on Vivi's arms and legs, visible despite the princess dress she was currently wearing as she sat taking her ease on a balcony overlooking Alubarna. Her eyes were also slightly darker, slightly deeper looking than they had been.

And, there were currently a few sandy hands appearing from around her elbows, holding a cup of tea, a few papers and a pen. For Vivi had indeed eaten Crocodile's former fruit, the Suna Suna no Mi. But she used it in a very different manner most of the time.

Yet the smile on Vivi's face was the same warm, wide, kindly expression that the Straw Hats had seen so often as she turned from waving at a few children down below who had spotted her. She looked quizzically at the older man for a moment, then understood what he

was talking about, and her face shifted into a thoughtful one as she moved back to the table where the rest of her breakfast was laid out for Vivi, along with still more papers. Some had to deal with helping her father run the country, but most had pictures on them of various young men.

She looked at them askance, then very deliberately turned away to look at Igaram, making it clear that whatever those pictures referenced, she would much rather answer his question than think about them. "You mean the news about Fire Fist Ace being captured? I didn't believe it at first, but then I wondered why the World Government would lie about such a thing? I didn't know Ace particularly well, he was only with us briefly, but he impressed me with his strength and good nature." Vivi sighed in exasperation. "I truly wish that World Government had a more nuanced approach to pirates."

That confused the majordomo for a moment, and he cocked his head to one side quizzically. "Maah, Maaah, but Princess, you and your father have been trying to gather support to do away with the Shichibukai program, have you not? That seemingly removes the only way the Marines would be willing to deal with pirates."

"Yes, and not getting very far. But that is an entirely different matter. The World Government decides who to offer the Shichibukai position to based on strength and reputation rather than strength of character. If they had found pirates to fill the other positions like Jinbe or even Hawk Eyes, I wouldn't have a problem with it. But instead, they offered it to people like Crocodile, the mass murderer Kuma, and worse, Doflamingo."

Vivi shook her head, sitting down again and deliberately putting her teacup on the pile of papers with photos accompanying them. Igaram twitched at that but said nothing for the moment. A hand of sand lifted a scone to her mouth as she gazed into the sky above marshaling her thoughts. "Regardless, the real question you are asking is what I think the Straw Hats will do."

Igaram winced at that. "Princess, there are other rumors, nothing substantiated but... That is, maah, maah, I thought you had..."

"That I heard the rumors that the Straw Hats were defeated? That Luffy was killed by one of the other Shichibukai? I have heard that rumor. And I think it is complete bunk." Vivi laughed quietly, her eyes going soft and tender in a way that had given the majordomo nightmares several times over the past several month whenever the Straw Hats came up in conversation. Knowing how closely his Princess had come to simply running away to the oceans with them disturbed Igaram on a deep level.

But even then, Igaram didn't know everything. Vivi had never mentioned that night on the balcony to even Carue or the question she had posed to the girls in the bathhouse. If any of the pirates had asked her to come with them, she might well have done so, duty or no.

And duty is laying ever more heavily on my shoulders these days, specifically duties that I want nothing to do with! Vivi growled internally, not even so much as glancing at the paperwork underneath her plate as she continued to answer her friend's question.

"I will not believe any of that crew are dead unless I see the body myself. Luffy and the rest would not go quietly, regardless of the odds stacked against them. Now, what did you think of Kebi's suggestion for a new waterway? With my powers, I can easily help the project along, but I'm concerned about the overall damage to the local ecosystem."

"Maah, maah, I believe that Chaka has researched this very matter thoroughly, your Majesty, and he agrees it's a good idea. Further, your schedule is free this following week. But you really should put more thought into some of those marriage proposals. I realize that your father put that matter into your hands, but..." Igaram shut up as Vivi glanced up at him, her brows furrowing.

The fact was, Alabasta was in a somewhat tenuous place, politically speaking. Not internally, of course. Igaram was proud to say that the royal house had never been as popular as it currently was after Crocodile's machinations came to light. But the World Government had never been happy with how everything had occurred there, and it was very clear the WG and the marines knew that the story they'd been told wasn't the full version. The WG had also long been annoyed at how independent-minded the kings of Alabasta had been for several generations.

There was also some deeper tension there, but Igaram was not aware of where it came from. But it certainly had not helped matters currently. The World Government had thus begun to subtly push things politically and in terms of trade, setting tariffs and getting their allies to even outright halt selling certain items to Alabasta. Thus, they had made it known that the kingdom needed to get back into their good graces somehow.

And one way they could do this would be for Vivi to wed a royal of the Gorosei's choice and thus be tied to the World Government. They hadn't outright stated this, and they had sent her a dozen profiles to choose from, but both Cobra and his household had been able to read between the lines.

Igaram thought all this was nonsense. He felt that, if anything, the WG should have been trying to appease Alabasta, given it had been one of their vaunted Shichibukai who had gone rogue and caused all the troubles in the first place. But the WG didn't see it that way. They did not acknowledge any culpability in Crocodile's actions.

Despite that, Igaram felt it his duty to push Vivi gently on this point. Not to marry any of the WG's choices, of course. But King Cobra had also found a few men with whom he felt Vivi might build a relationship and hinted he would like to see the succession secured. He would never force Vivi to marry someone, but he wanted his daughter to start thinking about it. He'd

been married when he was fifteen after all, and most royals who were married would say the same.

Igaram also thought, although he wouldn't admit it aloud, that a marriage would help combat his nightmares about Vivi deciding to run away to see.

The majordomo's internal musings were interrupted by a worried-looking maid coming onto the patio. "Princess, your father requests you in the throne room."

Vivi blinked before frowning in concern even as she rose from her chair. "Katie, my father hates being in the throne room. Why does he want to meet me there?"

"A, ah, a representative has arrived from the Marines and requested to speak to you and your father. An Admiral Stainless."

That caused Vivi's frown to deepen, and she hurried around the table, nodding to Igaram to fall in beside her. A feeling of trepidation and concern was growing inside her, and she didn't know why. "In that case, let's not keep him waiting..."

OOOOOOO

Others were also still thinking about or dealing with the news of Fire Fist Ace being captured. Indeed, in one such case, they were coming back to the problem for the twentieth time since that news had first been announced in the papers.

"Dammit, Dragon! Ace is my brother! I am not just going to..."

"You can, and you are!" Monkey D. Dragon, leader of the Revolutionary Army, growled angrily as he stared at one of his best officers while nearby, several other officers quickly exited the room, including this specific officer's girlfriend.

The officer in question was a tall young man, standing about the same height as Ace, although thinner in the shoulders. He was built for speed more than strength and stood almost like a runner poised at the heart of one of the Revolutionary Army's headquarters, glaring at his boss. The young blond man with a nasty scar over one eye was also dressed in a rather dapper fashion, with a long waistcoat, black pants and a top hat to go with a cravat and white undershirt.

This matched poorly with the snarl currently on his face. "Give me one goddamn reason why I should leave my brother to swing!"

This was Sabo, brother to Ace and Luffy, erstwhile brother to the current king of Goa Kingdom. Or as Dadan knew him, one of the three hellions that made her life unbearable when they were younger. He had joined the Revolutionary Army after the Gray Terminal Incident and

had been the first of the three to leave the island, although he had stayed in contact via Den Den Mushi and semi-frequent visits back when they were younger until Ace left in turn. And despite eventually joining his crew to that of Whitebeard, the two of them have remained close ever since.

The first time the news of Ace's capture had reached them, it had been all Dragon could do to stop the man from trying to single-handedly invade Marineford to find where they were keeping Ace. And yet, Dragon had done so. Because in this war, he saw opportunity.

"Think about it!" Dragon growled, shaking his head. "Whitebeard is no friend of the revolution, but he considers Ace one of his sons. And his moniker of being the strongest man in the world is not without merit. I know Whitebeard could beat me like a drum. It will take everything the Marines have to face him."

He willed the younger man to understand his point, but Sabo simply glared back at him. "You'll have to give me more than that old man! You've been putting me off for more than a week now. It's getting too damn close to when Ace is supposed to be executed. We don't have any time left for me to plan a way to get him out on my own, so I'll have to piggyback on whatever Whitebeard is planning. And while you and he might not be friends, Whitebeard knows I'm a friend of Ace and will probably let me come along. So give me a good reason why I shouldn't, or I am walking!"

Dragon held that glare for a few seconds, then realized the man wouldn't budge and decided to bring him into his confidence a little more. He glanced around him, gesturing out the door, and when the rest of the officers present had left, he shut the door behind them. Then he went to a portion of the wall and activated a device within. If anyone attempted to listen in now, all they would hear several songs played on a series of speakers set into the wall around the office.

With that done, Dragon moved back to the desk that dominated the room, picking up several different maps. None of them were any kind of map Nami would have been willing to put her name on, but they were among the best the Revolutionary Army could get their hands on. "What is more important, Ace or freeing several dozen islands from World Government control?"

"What are you talking about?" Sabo demanded, confused.

"The World Government and the Marines believe that removing Whitebeard will strengthen their own position in the long run. They could be correct in that. However, in their attempt to do so, they are weakening their position as it is now," Dragon emphasized the point by pointing to a few of the maps. "They are pulling most of their officers and several of their fleets in to help fight Whitebeard, weakening them in other places. This is something we can take advantage of."

Sabo was one of Dragon's chief officers for a reason. He read the maps quickly, discerning the relevant information as well as bringing up some more information in his own head that he knew about the islands in question. "We'll never hold all of this! Not unless the marines and World Government are battered far more than could ever be called a victory for them," he protested. "Besides, why not join forces with Whitebeard, go for a full victory and wipe the Marines out!"

"Speak sense! Do you think the world would be a more peaceful place without the Marines doing their part? As much as I loathe the World Government and what it stands for and hate the Marines for their sophistry, common Marines do more good than harm. And their organization wouldn't survive if the Marines lost this war. No, the best outcome for us would be for the World Government to be badly weakened, which I think is what will occur. Whitebeard is strong, but he is also old and headstrong. Not a good combination."

The younger man scowled at that but couldn't argue with Dragon's points. And looking at all the maps that Dragon had prepared, it was obvious that he had begun to make this plan long in advance. If it worked out even at a minimum, twelve more islands would join the revolutionaries in the New World and a handful more elsewhere. Some willingly. Others would need a change of government for that to occur, but that was fine by Sabo.

Watching, Dragon almost smiled as Sabo's face showed his inner turmoil, the conflict between two contradicting imperatives. His loyalty and belief in the Revolutionary cause on the one hand, and his love for his brother on the other. "Letting Whitebeard protect his son or freeing as many as fifty islands from the World Government, several of which I will need your help with. I suppose there are only two questions you need to ask yourself. What is more important, you're attempting to rescue Ace or the revolution? And how much trust do you put in Whitebeard and his crew? And your other brother, who undoubtedly will also be throwing his lot in with Whitebeard to free Ace."

Dragon had heard that his son was dead but had dismissed that rumor entirely. A youngster with the willpower of the Will of D would not die in such a manner. No, his son was still out there somewhere and would be wreaking havoc if he knew what was happening with Ace.

Sabo snorted at that, then stared down at the map. Dragon said nothing for a while, and finally, Sabo opened his mouth and gave his answer.

OOOOOO

Thanks to the ship's Eternal Pose directing them straight there, the trip to Enies Lobby took about a week.

This place was a major World Government military base. In point of fact, it was the largest and most important one within Paradise, the first half of the Grand Line. It was a largish

island, perhaps about the size of Water 7, but the entirety of it was a massive WeeGee base. Split into three sections, the whole island seemed precariously perched in the center of a huge waterfall, which surrounded the main portion of the island on every side. That portion was connected to the outer Day Station, which served as the egress point into the main island segment. At the far end of the island from that land bridge was a drawbridge leading to another outer island bit, which was itself connected to the Gates of Justice, the monstrous constructs serving as a backdrop to the entire island.

Coming into the Judicial Island's weather system was incredibly jarring for everyone aboard Gion's ship, but a good kind of jarring. For the past two days, the ship had been dealing with the extreme weather of the Grand Line. First came a snowstorm followed by a storm of swordfish, wind that had nearly torn the masts out, with Ranma up in the rigging at the time, and numerous different types of currents trying to pull the ship off course.

But the instant they entered Enies Lobby's weather area, all of that went away, almost like it had been cut away by a guillotine. Here the sun was shining brightly, it was a warm day, and all the Marines rejoiced.

"Welcome to Enies Lobby, the land where the sun never sets," one of the marines said as they passed Ranko, smacking her shoulder lightly with a palm.

By this point, the marines had somewhat welcomed the trio of bounty hunters and the crew, all three of them having shown no hesitation in pitching in. In turn, the pirates had successfully kept some distance between them and the marines. There had been a few incidents across that divide, but not many. Thankfully, it seemed that Gion had left a lot of her paperwork to pile up, and she kept mostly to herself or went down to talk to Zoro about swordsmanship for some reason. Trying to get him to confess to using some kind of teleportation-style Devil Fruit. This started on the second day out and amusingly began a process in which the two pirates became closer to some of the crew than the three bounty hunters.

The three bounty hunters had been taking their meal with Gion, who was walking them through the process of joining the marines and immediately being transferred into officer training. Something that they would need. All three of them were too strong already to be regular marines, obviously, but they would still need training in how to deal with leading people and the various paperwork that came with it.

They were interrupted when one of the marines approached Gion, saluting and standing at attention until she acknowledged him. "What is it, sailor?"

"Ma'am, the Pirate Hunter is making trouble."

"How?" Gion asked, not leaping to her feet or rushing off as most marine officers might have when hearing a prisoner was making trouble. "Unless someone very stupidly came too close to him with the key to his chains, I can't see him making trouble at all."

"That's just it, Admiral." All the marines aboard called Gion Admiral or Sir, never ma'am Ranko noticed. "He's threatening to try and tear his cuffs out on the bulkhead unless we let him do something. He is willing to give his word that he won't try to escape, but he wants to do something in his cell. And his attempts are starting to warp the bulkhead so..."

"He does realize that he's a prisoner, right? He doesn't make deals like that, regardless of a temper tantrum," Gion grumbled, pushing to her feet.

When asked if they wanted to come down with her, Ranko waved her off, indicating she wanted to finish eating. Ranko trusted her first mate not to make too much trouble for now. Not when the whole plan revolved around them arriving at their destination without having done so.

She did have a question, though, that the marine's mode of address a moment ago had brought to her mind. Gion was about to turn away from the table they had been eating at when she asked, "By the way, why do none of your Marines call you ma'am?"

Every marine within hearing, of which there were several as Gion always ate with her crew in the main galley, flinched at her words.

Gion turned to her, her eyes literally blazing fire for a moment. "Because 'ma'am' is how you address a middle-aged or older woman, and I am not middle-aged or older! Anyone who insinuates otherwise is looking for a one-way trip to the bottom of the ocean..." Gion growled out, reaching down and patting Ranko on the head with enough force to make Ranko's bones creak as Ranko once more cursed the phenomenon known as female fury. "I'm certain you're not trying to do any such thing riiiiight?"

"Nope, not me! Why would anyone call a graceful, beautiful woman like yourself something so old-fashioned anyway?" Ranko grunted under the impact of her patting.

"Good." Gion then smiled suddenly, turned, and walked out of the alley, heading downwards with Makino trailing, shaking her finger at Ranko admonishingly as if to say that had been obvious before she was out of sight.

"Seriously? How was I supposed to know!" Ranko exclaimed, looking over at Brook. "I mean, come on!"

"Unfortunately, I cannot help you there. Despite my age, I am no closer to understanding the female mind than any other man is, so my ability to help an actual woman in

that endeavor is nonexistent. Although perhaps if you let me look at your panties, I might have a better idea, Yohohohoho," Brook wheedled.

"Don't wear 'em," Ranko said, putting her feet up on the chair Makino had just recently vacated and leaning back, wondering what was going on down below. "Boxers are where it's at."

As the rest of the crew there stared at Ranko in surprise and some intrigue, Makino and Gion marched down into the brig and made their way to the two cells where the pirates were being kept. The two of them hadn't yet made any trouble, although their shouting matches and diatribes at one another had become the talk of the crew and a source of great entertainment for the marines stationed nearby watching over them just in case.

That didn't mean, however, that Gion would treat them any better than she would otherwise. "You realize that you are a prisoner right? You do not get to make demands."

In fact, both pirates were dead men breathing at the moment, but Gion saw no reason to rub that in their faces. It would have been needlessly cruel. She would let that kind of thing to Sadie and the rest of the sadists at Impel Down.

"Maybe I don't get to make demands, but I could make trouble," Zoro grunted, pulling at his chains a little. "And you wouldn't like that."

"The stupid Marimo has been grumbling about being unable to exercise milady," Sanji said from his cell. "It's getting to the point where it's truly annoying me. I realize that giving him weights or anything similar would be foolish, but at least give him a book or something to do so he doesn't grumble so much it bothers my beauty sleep."

The fact that this was all said around a cigarette that Sanji had somehow hidden from her people annoyed Gion somewhat, but she let that slide. Not being a smoker herself, she felt that a disgusting habit.

Gion scowled a bit, then sighed. "It's true this voyage will last for a while." Then her gaze sharpened, and she glared at Zoro. "But I will have your word that you will make no trouble or try to escape or attack my people if I allow you free movement in your cell. I will have your oath from one swordsman to another."

Zoro glared at her, but after a few seconds, he relented, saying, "I swear I won't attack your people or make any trouble or even try to leave my cell or in any way try to escape while under your control."

Gion snorted a bit at that, understanding that Zoro had very carefully left himself an outlet for when Zoro was no longer under her control. But if the Santoryu user thought he

could escape from Impel Down, he had another thing coming. "I'll accept that. But you're not going to get weights or anything similar."

She held a hand out, and one of her officers handed her the key, which she used to open the cell door and then stepped into the cell, coming quite close to Zoro. So close he could smell her perfume, and he grimaced a little, cursing himself for noticing and looking up at the ceiling to not look down at her cleavage.

"That's fine," he said as the chains dropped from his arms and legs. "I can still do some exercises so that my muscles don't atrophy at least."

"Oh my, the swordsman said a complicated word! I'm astonished. Although, my lady, if you are willing to take that brute's word that he will not escape, would you mind if I gave my own parole? These chains are quite uncomfortable," Sanji opined from the other side.

Rolling her eyes, Gion stepped back out of Zoro's cell, closing and locking it behind her. While he had given her his word, that didn't mean she would dangle too much temptation in front of him. "You're not a swordsman, and from Hina's report and the report I got about that disaster at Water 7, you're far too tricky a person for me to believe your word in the first place. Still, I suppose I can at least release your arms."

She stepped into Sanji's cell, ignoring how he bowed his head and thanked her in an overdone manner, smirking a little at Zoro's growl of, "Way to let the side down, Love Cook! Swear to God, I would've thought running into the Kuja and getting our asses nearly kicked would've cured you of that kind of stupidity."

She released Sanji's arms from where they had been chained to the wall and stepped back, making no move to unlatch his legs, quickly turning and leaving the brig. "Get the cook some cookbooks, maybe. Something to do while biding away his time in that cell so he won't make trouble."

Not an hour later, Gion found her paperwork time interrupted by another marine, who informed her that Sanji also wished to have a writing implement of some kind. Hours after that, she had to order her ship's cooks to not bother the prisoner any longer, as all of them had been down taking notes of the changes he had made to the cookbook he'd been given and asking him questions. Others were also asking Zoro questions about his exercise regimen. "They are prisoners, marines! Leave them alone!"

The next instance also included the prisoners and was much more violent, when 'Ranko' helped a dozen of the marines as they dealt with Sanji going crazy...

Ranko jerked upright in her hammock, flipping herself over the edge and landing on her feet as alarms began to wail throughout the ship and shouts of "Black Leg Sanji is free!"

"What the hell? What is that idiot doing now?" she grumbled, looking over at her companions, who were also slowly waking up. The Grand Line Weather had really battered them the day before, and all three had been on duty for most of it.

"I don't know, but he is disturbing my beauty sleep," Makino muttered, grabbing several of her pistols.

"Yohohohoho, never fear, dear lady, one such as you no longer needs such things to be gorgeous. By the way, might I see your panties to help me wake up?" Brook asked.

He was swiftly hurled out ahead of the others by a kick from Makino. "As if!"

"You need to angle your next kick a little better. If you had, Jack might have bounced off the wall across from our room down the hall rather than just pile up there," Ranko said critically as she passed the crumpled heap of the skeleton.

"I'll do better next time," Makino said, following Ranko as Brook moved to join them, murmuring about how harsh he was.

They ran into Gion, who had also been on duty the night before and was evidently not very good at waking up. Her teeth were set in a rictus of rage, her hair was all over the place, and she had evidently only bothered to pull on her Captain's cloak over what looked like surprisingly cute sleepwear. A flannel shorts and shirt combo, the shorts came down to just below her rear, and the shirt was cropped short, letting her stomach and a bit of underboob be shown. But they were also in pink, with tiny swords with eyeballs and smiles scattered around.

"Mah, that's quite cute and yet at the same time sexy. Where did you get those?" Makino asked as they fell into step with the officer.

"It's the Star brand. They've got a massive emporium in the New World I go to. Not like it matters right now. How the hell did Black Leg get free of his chains!" Gion growled. "I think I might have to break his precious legs if he can do something like this."

While normally, Luffy would've been all for a woman threatening Sanji, this was a marine woman doing it, and Luffy had to fight hard to keep a scowl off her face. Besides, she was also very certain that why Sanji was trying to break out was important. *Maybe some Marines snuck down for a bit of beating or torture? If someone with a key came too close...*

Just then, the deck heaved, and a shout from on high could be heard passing through the various hatches separating the ship's interior from the main deck. "We're caught in a new undercurrent! A whirlpool just appeared to starboard aft of the ship! It's pulling us in!"

Gion paused then and looked at the three bounty hunters. "I'm needed on deck. Can you handle Black Leg?"

"Be serious! I'm the one that captured him in the first place, remember?" Ranko answered harshly, gesturing to Makino and Brook. "You two go with her."

Gion nodded and, still dressed in her sleepwear, raced towards the nearest stairs leading up onto the main deck.

Ranko soon reached the galleon's cells, where he found marines trying desperately to hold Sanji back. Several of them were firing at him from where Ranko entered, as two others tried desperately to fight Sanji hand to hand, although only one of them was armed with a sword. Four others were unconscious at his feet, and even from here, Ranko could see the gleam of a key laying next to one. *So that's one mystery solved, at least.*

Ranko watched as Sanji kicked one of the Marines in the stomach, then whirled, kicking another in the side, launching him down the hallway into the other Marines who were currently firing at him. Ranko quickly stepped between them, catching the Marine and setting him on his feet behind the firing line as she watched Sanji dance around the bullets coming his way. "Is it just me, or do his eyes look bloodshot?"

"He was shivering and shaking in his cot!" the Marine Ranko had just caught jabbered, shaking his head quickly. "Two of us covered the doc as he got close, and then Sanji was grabbing him, tossing him towards us, shouting about something, but I couldn't hear what over the doc's own screaming."

"So either he's coming down with something that's giving him hallucinations, or..." Ranko trailed off, shaking her head. "You know what, it doesn't matter."

She hopped into the air, bouncing off the ceiling above, then towards Sanji, lashing out with a kick, which Sanji blocked with one of his own. However, Ranko flipped herself over her opponent's head, grabbing at it with both hands, bringing her head down to slam her forehead into Sanji's before he could dodge. *Sanji's always had issues remembering that the head can also be a weapon,* the undercover pirate captain reflected.

But this time, Sanji barely registered the blow, his hands coming up to Ranko's surprise. Two punches slammed into Ranko's chest, hurling Ranko the length of the break back into the far bulkhead further down the hallway. "Give it to me! Give it to me!" The cook shouted.

Ranko landed feet first against the aft bulkhead, kicking off easily and bouncing her way forward from one side of the hall to the other. Closing, she lashed out with a punch that Sanji blocked again. However, he did turn away from where he had been charging towards the still-firing marines, the last of the ones who had charged forward unconscious at his feet.

This time Ranko went low, using Sanji's block to bounce down into the deck below, then up into a rising punch that caught Sanji on the chin. Nevertheless, Sanji grabbed her arm before she could pull back, causing Ranko's eyes to widen. *I'm not holding back my speed or strength*

all that much, and this is the second time he's used his hands in a fight! What a freaking time for all of my lessons on that score to finally penetrate his thick head!

She flung herself into the jail cells to either side, grunting as she hit, growling out over Sanji's continual stream of 'give them to me!' "What the hell is he talking about!?"

"Don't look at me. Love Cook just started to quiver and shake yesterday. He tried to sleep it off, whatever it was and woke up bloodshot this morning. I suppose Swirly Brow could be going into withdrawal from interacting with girls or something," Zoro said derisively. He'd made no move from his cell and gave off the impression that he was watching all this with some amusement.

Ranko growled at that, lashing out with a kick that this time got through Sanji's defenses, smashing into his nose with bone-breaking force, causing him to fly sideways into a cell door. The metal buckled under the impact, but Sanji came right back in, his eyes wide and nearly unseeing. "Are you freaking serious! It's some kind of mental disorder thing that he has to be around ladies or something? But then, shouldn't he be stopping or losing power now that he's fighting me?!"

"How should I know? We were crewmates, but I was never Swirly Brow's keeper!" Zoro growled back.

The swordsman was doing a good job of keeping in character, Ranko reflected. He was actually quite proud of his first mate there. He knew Sanji could have played the role, but Zoro surprised him. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

Zora frowned for a moment, then paused, thinking about it again. "Come to think of it, it's been a few days since Love Cook last had a cigarette."

As that word left Zoro's mouth, Sanji wailed like a lost soul, "Nicotine! Give me nicotine! Cigarettes!"

For a moment, the firing from the marines slacked off, and they stared at the rampaging Sanji and the several Marines at his feet before they shouted, "All this about cigarettes!?"

At that point, Ranko got behind Sanji once more. From there, she got Sanji in a submission hold, her arms wrapped under his armpits and then his hands locked behind his bed. With that hold locked in, Ranko bent backward, lifting the taller off his feet as her back bowed like a snake.

Normally, Ranko knew, the fact that this move pressed her chest into his back would probably have caused Sanji to go into full Mellorine Mode™. But he was astonishingly too far gone from lack of nicotine to notice.

Ranko snarled, "Will someone give him a damn cigarette?"

As Gion didn't smoke herself, her marines had mostly either not gotten into the habit or set it aside to curry her favor. So there were only a few smokers on the crew. But eventually, a cigarette was found, and a marine rushed forward, stuffing it into Sanji's mouth as Ranko continued to hold him in place. The man was still thrashing, trying to escape her grip and shouting about needing nicotine.

But now, the man calmed down almost instantly, and as the same Marine lit the cigarette, Sanji took a deep drag, seemingly on autopilot. Only as the nicotine hit his system a second later did Sanji seem to return to himself once more. "Oh, that's the good stuff. Wait, what the...? Why..."

Sanji became aware of his current predicament, being kept dangling in the air, his feet unable to touch the ground as Ranko bent over backward underneath him, although Sanji could actually see who was holding him at present. But regardless of who, it was obvious it was a woman, given the breasts pressed into his back, and the response was immediate. "MellorinEEEEEE!"

That was as far as he got before Ranko jerked sideways, slamming his head into the nearest jail cell with such force that the bars contorted around his face for a second, and he finally slumped unconscious. She let him drop there, stepping back and muttering, "Unclean! Unclean!"

She then rounded on the Marines, pointing to the ones in the hatch leading into the brig. "Get him back into his cell and chained up again. Then make sure he's got a daily allotment of cigarettes. I don't care if they'll give them to him in Impel Down. I just don't want us to deal with this shit now."

All of the groaning Marines chorused an agreement, and Ranko bent down, helping them in twos or even threes to head to the infirmary. Where he found that the doc had been one of the first wounded.

Thankfully for everyone involved, once Gion learned about what had happened, she forbade anyone from entering either of the pirates' cells until they were ready to transfer the two prisoners to Impel Down. And she seconded Ranko's suggestion that Sanji be given a few cigarettes daily.

Another incident happened between Ranko and the rest of the crew, costing a bit of the goodwill the redhead might have gathered in the Sanji incident.

For some reason, Makino gave off a far too big sisterly vibe for many of the marines to want to flirt with her. A few older hands did, but she dealt with it graciously enough, and they

all took her rebuffs well. But Ranko intrigued far more of the younger marines than Makino did, her tomboyish attitude and down-home looks attracting them.

However, while Ranko dealt with any flirting brusquely, ignoring them or giving the flirter withering looks, one marine took it too far. He followed her around through the rigging, flirting outrageously.

Ranko put up with this in deference to Gion initially, and several of his other fellow marines were telling him to back off. But when he began to do the same thing the next time she was on duty and tried to take it a little further, staring down her shirt or making to feel up her ass, Ranko decided enough was enough.

The man barely had time to squawk before Ranko grabbed him by the leg, tossing him into the air. A rope wrapped around his body for a second, and he went over the ship's side to splash into the water far below.

"Man overboard!" came the shout from many, but Ranko ignored them, hopping down to the deck, where she found one of the crew's fishing rods, tying the rope to the top of it, and hopping onto the railing where she began to play with it, pulling the man this way and that via the rope.

Gion came down from where she had been at the wheel, her eyes narrowed as the rest of the marines raced to the side, several of them readying floaters to toss out to the man, only stopping when Ranko glared at them, hefting the rod in her hands meaningfully.

"And what is the meaning of this?" Gion growled.

"The guy took his flirting too far. I figure if he's going to try to fish for girls, I can use him to fish for fish," Ranko quipped.

Gion stared at her, then shook her head slowly from side to side. "I appreciate the sentiment, but that man is one of my crew. If he's bothering you, take it to the bosun, and we'll deal with it..." She trailed off as Ranko twitched the line, pulling the man out of the water just ahead of a shark. A bang from behind them rang out as Makino fired on it with one of her pistols, and the shark fell back, a whole neatly drilled hole in the side of its head.

The Marine, wet, shivering and now terrified, landed on the deck, and Ranko quickly hopped into the air, bouncing towards the now floating shark body, grabbing it up and out of the water before returning to the ship, holding it out to Gion. "You sure? I could really supplement our rations like this, you know."

Gion stared at the fish, then down at the man, and slowly shook her head. "I don't think so, no. The fish is welcome, and I think, Seaman Lawrence, your role in bringing it to the ship

has saved you from a flogging. But from now on, everyone, remember no means no. I'm honestly appalled I have to say this to anyone from my crew."

The looks Lawrence was getting from some of his fellows probably implied that he would be subjected to a bit of below-decks justice, but many of those gazes were also sympathetic, while glares Ranko's way were less than welcoming.

But the hidden pirate was fine with that. *The idiot won't try to flirt with me again, and no one else will. And if they stay away from me, all the better.*

In this manner, time had passed on the ship. And now they were here, at Enies Lobby.

At Gion's order, the three bounty hunters and Gion went ashore. Gion smiled widely as she saw one of the Marine officers stationed there. "T Bone!"

The Marine in question smiled back, although it was somewhat hard to tell with his face. Ranko had heard the term 'lugubrious' before but had never seen a face that so easily demonstrated it. Or one that would not have looked out of place on a zombie.

He nodded slowly to Gion, saluting crisply as the Marines around him did the same. "Admiral Gion, welcome to Enies lobby. I understand you are passing through with two prisoners? And three possible recruits? Baskerville has requested that you bring those three to him for the paperwork."

"We're on our way there already. But how are you? Since you've been stationed here, I haven't seen much of you," Gion asked. "I'm certain I'm going to see you in a few days when Fire Fist's execution occurs, but we won't have time then to catch up."

"I'm afraid we don't have time now. Although I am touched by your concern, it is that kind of understanding and concern for your subordinates that I try to teach my own people," T Bone said with a nod, none there noticing how Ranko's eyes went hard and dangerous for a moment. "But I have been doing well enough. My blade is getting a little rusty here, but I am still doing good by the troopers and World Government officials I lead. That is enough for me."

The two Marines chatted companionably as forty Marines fell in around them, looking at the trio of bounty hunters curiously. T Bone glanced towards Brook occasionally, but that seemed simple curiosity rather than suspicion.

The group made their way throughout the island while their ship was directed around it, pushed by special steam-powered tugboats. The waterfall around the island created too strong a current for any sail-powered ship to combat unless the Gates of Justice were open. At that point, the waterfalls would slowly die out as the current pulled the water away from the side of the island.

And all around them, Ranko saw units of the World Government. The majority of these were simple men in uniform, like the marines or in the suits of the World Government officials preferred. Those always reminded him of movies about the CIA or FBI that he'd occasionally seen back in his old dimension. *Or that one group that dealt with aliens.*

Others surprised him. There were two giants there, who towered over almost all of the buildings around them as they waved towards Gion. These were the first giants that Ranko had seen, real ones anyway. He hardly doubted that the monster Oz would have counted, even if it had been alive. Still, in comparison, they looked less than impressive.

Gion waved back at the two giants, listening to their bellowing greetings and returning her own, showing that Gion was a celebrity among the marines and their allies. Ranko put that down to a combination of her good looks and rank until one of the giants shouted, "Well, sad to hear that you can't spend too much time on the island this time. But come back soon. I want a rematch, dammit! Losing to one of you little folk in a one-on-one contest, no matter your rank? That hurts my pride as a giant of Elbaf!"

"You're two hundred years too early to challenge me, Kashii. But I'd be interested in having a contest of how many pirates you can beat sometime. First to two hundred gets all the grog!" Gion shouted back, and both giants hollered in reply while most of the marines and many of the WeeGee officials looked pained.

Makino noted that Gion also looked pained for a second, and she knew it had nothing to do with why the people around them were doing so. *She flinched when she saw the giants. Some secret there, perhaps? I wonder how two giants who don't dress like Marines have come to work with them?*

She was tempted to ask but decided against it. At this point, solving that kind of mystery served no purpose.

For her part, Ranko put any thought about the two giants to one side. In her mind, the bigger they were, the easier they attracted lightning. She was more interested in the numerous other units they saw her in the place. There were groups of what looked like dog riders, moving about all over the area, sparring with one another, while in other places, Ranko caught glimpses of marines in firing lines firing off large bombards that two of them had to work together to lift.

"Is it always so busy here?" Makino asked.

"Not always. Most of the units here are getting ready to be sent elsewhere," Gion answered, not looking at the other woman. Makino looked at her, then shrugged her shoulders, obviously deciding it was none of her business as the doors ahead opened.

Meanwhile, Brook, nee Skeleton Jack, was busily trying not to draw attention to himself, or at least as much as a skeleton with an afro could. *This is making me more nervous than even*

stepping onboard Gion's ship for the first time. Keep it together, Brook, please, keep it together. Don't let them hear your knees knocking!

And Ranko was looking around, intrigued. Oddly enough, looking around the main town of Enies Lobby, she felt the architecture looked like that they had seen in Alabasta. That caused the redhead to snort under her breath. *I wonder why I keep thinking about Alabasta lately... and a certain princess too.* Unseen by any, 'Ranko' rolled her eyes. *Yeah, even I can figure out that mystery. After all, in a very real way that was my first kiss not just in this world, but my old life too.* In his old life, Ranko had only been kissed on the cheek a few times, and that one kiss from Mikado while in his female form.

Fuck now I'm depressed at how slow I was about all this guy/girl stuff. Still, thanks to Robin, I've sure made up for lost time. 'Ranko's' smile turned a little sultry at that, causing several of the dog riders they had just passed to blush and stare after her. *Heh, and I think after all this is over with, we'll have earned ourselves a nice vacation. I wonder if she and Hancock would like to find a resort island somewhere and just have a week to ourselves?*

A nudge to her side brought Luffy back to the here and now. They had reached a large building set at the far back of the main island area, which flew several WeeGee flags. Admitted quickly, the three disguised pirates found themselves at the back of a large courtroom. At the front of the courtroom was a strange three-headed man sitting behind an upraised desk, dressed like a judge, working on paperwork as several World Government officials stood nearby.

"Baskerville, what is it like having both the workload and the official responsibility for the island now?" Gion asked.

"Hard work," one head said.

This was followed by a second head saying, "While we were used to the paperwork, having to also deal with the higher-ups as Spandam did before this is quite troublesome."

"Why, it's so bad that some of us are in danger of losing our hair," the third joked, looking over at the other two, who both growled at him a little. One of their heads already had fully white hair, but the other two looked a little younger.

"Ranko, Elizabeth and Skeleton Jack be known to Chief Magistrate Baskerville," Gion introduced them. "He's not only the judge of any criminals or pirates brought through here but is now also the official governor of the island."

One of the heads was very obviously looking Ranko up and down and opened his mouth to speak. The middle head however smacked into it, causing it to silence itself, as the third head, the first one to have originally spoken, spoke up once more. "Our report said you

were instrumental in bringing Black Leg Sanji to justice. And that you have evinced an interest in becoming Marine officers. Is that correct?"

"That's right," Ranko supplied for them all. "I'm still a little leery about the paperwork and all the rules and laws I'd have to follow, but if it's the best way to keep pirates like Black Leg or some of the others out there from plying the waves, then it sounds like a good deal to me. Which doesn't even consider all the kowtowing to the World Government and its little bitches you have to do."

While Gion smirked, having heard this conversation before, both side heads looked at her in shock, and the middle had growled, "And who are you to use such labels against the glorious Tenryubito!"

"I never mentioned them by name. You made that connection all your own," Ranko said, making finger guns and pointing them at the judge.

All three heads' eyes widened, and both side heads smacked into the middle, growling out, "What the hell, you buffoon!"

"Anyway, we're here to have the three of them do some paperwork to take them with us to Impel Down. That was my agreement with Ranko that she would see Sanji handed over to the guards of Impel Down and that she would be given the money for his bounty then. Besides, if she joins up with the marines now, she won't get the bounty," Gion explained.

"Why wouldn't you just take the money and sign up as marines now?" one of the heads argued. "Surely you know that any chance of a Marine could escape from Gion is very low indeed, especially once they go through the Gates of Justice."

Ranko shrugged her shoulders, looking a little grim. "I captured Buggy the Clown back in East Blue. I handed them over to the marines in pieces, most of his body in a barrel of seawater. Apparently, he later escaped and not only escaped but also murdered all of the marines on the base. I was hella shocked when I heard that news and was almost tempted to try to go after him again. But by that point, I was on the Grand Line. Which doesn't even mention the first bounty I captured, who apparently also escaped and made trouble at Logue Town. You Marines don't exactly have the best track record when it comes to keeping bounties I've handed over to you."

All three of Baskerville's heads twitched and growled angrily at that before looking over at Gion, asking in stereo if she had really made this agreement. When Gion nodded, the main head sighed and gestured the three bounty hunters to one side, where one of his secretaries handed them some paperwork and another hefted a camera. "You'll be filling out the paperwork for civilian contractors. That will allow us to let you through the Gates of Justice. We'll also take mugshots of you for our records just in case something happens."

While the redheaded bounty hunter nodded equitably inside, Luffy snarled in annoyance. Not only would that mean that this form would probably be connected to the coming events in no uncertain terms, but Makino and Brook would be known to the Marines from now on.

Still, as she let her picture be taken, Ranko was somewhat philosophical about things. She doubted there would be any bigger caper than this to use her cursed form with. So really, what was she losing in the long run?

When it was his time to have his picture taken, Brook found the three-headed judge leaning over his podium to stare down at him. Both side heads looked a little confused, but the middle one had raised a hand and stroked his long beard thoughtfully as he stared at Brook. "You look familiar, Skeleton Jack. Something about that Afro rings a bell in my mind. Something about when I was a very young marine just starting out..."

Thankful that he no longer had a true gullet to gulp, Brook shrugged his shoulders and said, "Since I only transformed into this form a few years ago, I'm afraid you have the advantage of me there."

"Does the name Rumber Pirates mean anything to you?" the judge barked suddenly.

Makino and Ranko almost froze where they were, but thankfully for everyone present, none of the people around them noticed, instead watching the judge seriously. Moreover, Brook didn't respond, simply mugging cheerfully at the camera, then shaking his head as the picture spat out the side of the camera. "I'm afraid not, should it?"

"... Perhaps not. Although a talking skeleton is certainly strange. What kind of Devil Fruit caused it?"

Wondering where this was going, and worried that somehow this guy knew Brook, Makino nee Elizabeth interrupted. "I suppose we could ask you the same question, could we not, Chief Magistrate? I've heard of mythical Zoan-type devil fruits, but if you had taken the Dog Model, Cerberus, why would the Marines allow you to waste away as simply a chief magistrate? Other than that, I cannot imagine what other Devil Fruit would give you three heads, particularly one that would carry over into your base human body."

"OHOOH, there is no Devil Fruit to attribute to my three-headed nature, milady," said the leftmost head, who seemed a bit more of a flirt than the others.

"Indeed, there is no three-headed nature involved at all. We are in fact..." The judge quickly shifted, and the two hands to either side moved away from the third, their clothing somehow coming apart, leaving not one person but three, all of whom posed, while the World Government officials and the Marines all around them groaned, snickered, or laughed at what was obviously a local joke. "Three in one!"

“Wait, so you’re just three people? Then what’s up with the act then?” Ranko asked, legitimately confused. *Ugh, just the idea of sitting so close to someone else for so long, even if that person was Robin... eeegh.*

“We’re friends!” all three said, hopping together, the two on the side balancing their feet lightly on the large thighs of the middle one, raising their outermost hands in the air. Both their outermost arms were also far larger than the arms nearest the center man.

“... That explains nothing and everything. Thank you very much,” Ranko muttered, shaking her head.

But this little interlude had worked. The three judges were in such a good mood that even the middle one who had been suspicious of Brook didn’t bring it up again as the three of them were led up a few flights of stairs and then out onto a drawbridge.

The group passed over a drawbridge to the other side of the island. Here another tiny island had been created, holding a single large building. It was taller than any on the other side and connected directly to a long wharf that doubled as a bridge to the Gate of Justice.

Soon the group was through the building out the other side, where they found Gion's ship had been transferred by the locals. As they walked back up the gangplank, Ranko briefly concentrated on her Kenbunshoku. In female form without the Goro Goro no Mi to help, her range was far more limited. However, despite that, Ranko could sense the presence of individuals she knew, minds whose shapes she knew the flavor of.

Robin was out there, chopper Nami and Laki too. She couldn't sense Franky and wondered why. And there was another mind she felt was possibly Perona's, although Ranko didn't know her well enough to be certain, not without the Goro Goro no Mi. But they were out there, which meant the *Everlasting Resolve* was hidden under the waves somewhere nearby.

As she cut out that technique, Ranko gazed ahead of the ship, where the massive, monstrously-sized edifice that was the Gates of Justice was opening for them. They were so large they looked wider than the island and taller than the mountains of Drum Island. At the center was the symbol for the World Government, which separated as the doors opened and Gion's ship started through.

"Well, the hard part's done now. The current will take us soon. And after that, it is a straight ride through the calm belt to Impel Down. We'll be there in less than a day," Gion said.

Ranko nodded at that, still staring up at the giant wall in shock, keeping her thoughts to herself. One more day, and then the plan would begin in earnest. *Don't worry Ace, I'm coming to save you!*

The ship continued on its way, none aboard aware of their passengers' inner thoughts or the underwater shadow following them through the Gates of Justice.

End Chapter

I REAALLLY did not want to get bogged down in a transport chapter. But I also didn't want to entirely neglect world-building or character interaction. This left me in something of a quandary. Which I solved for a given value with this large chapter. Hopefully, I will be able to keep the size of the chapter down in the future.