

*I'm not Japanese and I can't draw.

Okay, guys, a brief announcement before we get into the chapter. I have changed a bit in the last chapter. I realized it made no sense and didn't give the meeting the proper amount of gravitas to have Robin and co leave the ship the instant Luffy is back aboard. Why, if that was the case, wouldn't Luffy have just sent for them from the mansion instead? So, I had them set up the meeting for later, then had Robin, Zoro and Chopper remain aboard the ship until it has finished moving back to where it was before. It's not a big deal, but if you don't know that the first scene with Luffy and co. could be a bit jarring.

Warning: this is a monster of a chapter, especially for this work. With all the battles occurring at the same time instead of mostly consecutively, I didn't want to break it apart into two chapters.

This has been edited by me with Grammarly, Hiryo, and Tomon. While I can't promise there won't be small mistakes, hopefully there won't be enough to harm your enjoyment of the chapter.

Chapter 26: Chase a Tiger, Find a Dragon

As the Resolve started to move back to its original position, Kalifa stood in a warehouse near those same wharves, speaking to several dozen shipwrights, all of whom specialized in working on cannons. They were called the Town Iron Guard, as they were the ones who also had created much of the defenses of Water 7 over the years, under Iceberg's direction. That was why Kalifa was there giving them a specific set of orders now.

"That's an unusual order, Miss. Normally, the Bombard Cable is used as a defensive measure, not to keep a pirate ship from escaping," said one man, a somewhat grandfatherly fellow with white hair and wide, circular glasses.

"Yeah, when a pirate crew gets up to mischief, normally the shipwrights all handle it, and we don't need to do much," opined another man. Not a shipwright, he was instead a metalsmith in charge of crafting the various cannons Galley-La company also sold with their ships.

"True, but this crew is different. Half of their crew has remained on the ship they came in, including the ones who might be the mastermind behind the mayor Iceberg's attack," Kalifa pushed her glasses up her nose for a moment. "We need to make certain that this crew cannot escape to plague us another day."

Of course, this wasn't what Iceburg had ordered. This was part of a plan that Jabra had thought up. Looking back on the discussion last night, Kalifa was impressed at how well he had planned for each of the Straw Hat's possible moves. He had plans to stop them from just leaving, which this discussion was a part of. He had plans to sabotage the Seatrain if the Straw Hats went after their fellows, simply leaving their ship behind. And then this plan, the plan where the Straw Hats would be willing to further split themselves, not understanding yet that they were the primary target of what was going on.

"But I thought this Robin woman who might be behind his assassinations would be at the meeting," the grandfatherly man questioned.

"She is, but so what? These are pirates. Only the rarest of them would not hesitate to leave crewmen behind if, in doing so, they could survive themselves.

A few of the others in the room muttered at that, wondering how a captain could be worthy of the title if they could leave behind portions of his crew. But these were indeed pirates, and while Water 7 dealt with pirates - they were around a third of the island's customers - they didn't have any love or respect for them.

"We'll do it, my lady. Should we wait until the ship is anchored by the wharves or raise the Bombard Cable as soon as we can without it being spotted?"

Kalifa frowned at that, tapping her fingers lightly against her thigh. "I believe that you should act as you see fit. If it seems they will not be docking, then raise the Bombard cable then."

And with that, Kalifa reflected, as she walked out of the warehouse, the pirate vessel will be stuck in one place, unable to flee when the marines arrive.

She shivered a little, grateful that she wouldn't be part of that aspect of the battle. Unlike many of the others, she fully believed that report on Luffy having the Haoshoku was accurate. Her father had been part of the CP9 team before the current group and had told Kalifa about a brief run-in he'd had with a pirate named Red Hair Shanks. It was one of the incidents that caused Shanks to be raised to Yonko status and had filled her father with horror at the power of that technique.

No, Kalifa wanted no part of that. *I know that the Marines will bring enough force to bear to wipe Monkey D. Luffy out along with whoever else is on the ship, but it will be a horrible fight, regardless.*

As she moved through the streets of Water 7, she nodded and smiled politely to the people around her, pointedly ignoring or glaring at the men who tried to proposition her. She then found a small café, moved into and asked politely to use the bathroom. There, she moved to the back of the wall, speaking in a low voice to Jabra, who had chosen this place as a place to

meet since Kalifa was too visible a person to be seen entering the back alleys or even be out of sight for very long. "It's done. The pirate ship will be trapped in the Pirate's Cove. Where do you want me involved once the fighting starts?"

"You'll be with us, taking on the first mate and Robin. I'll want you to concentrate on taking that Zoan out if you can, before capturing Nico Robin with Fukurou and me but don't put that in stone. It's a mistake to stick to a plan if the fight's not going that way," Jabra's voice said from the other side of the wall, right under the small window at the far back of the bathroom. He then paused, before asking, "Well, are you going to go or not?"

Kalifa punched at the wall with a growl, leaving a dent there right where Jabra's head should be. While she wasn't as prudish as her cover identity, Kalifa wasn't going to let any of her coworkers get away with that kind of thing. She heard Jabra's cackling voice disappear into the distance and scowled before turning towards the doorway.

Leaving the café, she looked at the face of one of the waiters who must've heard a thump. "You should probably get that window covered. I heard someone's breathing and looked up to see someone looking in." The man blanched as she went on with her normal line. "That is sexual harassment of the first order!"

The waiter babbled apologies and ran to get the manager, but Kalifa did not wait, instead leaving quickly, heading up to the mayor's palace, using one of the larger yagura-bull pulled water buses that crisscrossed Water 7. However, before she could reach her stops, Kalifa's Den Den Mushi rang in her pocket.

Frowning, she pulled it out, staring at it as the face shifted to the individual who had called her, groaning internally. She quickly hopped off of the bus, landing on a small walkway and moving into a tiny alleyway between two buildings, grateful that the city had yet to recover from the shock of the attack on Iceburg. That meant there weren't nearly as many people out and about as there normally were, and there was no one around at present.

Once certain there was no one around, and with the annoying 'buru-buru' noise making her teeth grind, Kalifa pulled out the speaker and began to speak into it. "This is not a good idea, sir. I'm still acting undercover despite recent events."

"I knowwww, and I've looked over the plan that Jabra submitted to me last night. At two in the morning, dammit, I need my sleep, the voice of Spandam, chief of the CP9, whined, the Den-Den Mushi doing the same thing.

Kalifa knew that had been a mistake: that Spandam, as their nominal head, had to okay any plans the assassins came up with. If they had needed to act immediately for some reason, that could well have tied their hands. But for all of his murderous tendencies, and Kalifa knew that while Rob Lucci was a murderer, one who barely cared the reasoning behind his doing so, he was also a stickler for the rules.

“But there was one thing that bothered me,” Spandam went on. “You still don’t have actual confirmation that Franky is the one who has the plan. “We need that confirmation. I am also reiterating the standing order to capture Nico Robin alive. That will be a massive feather in my, er, that is, our cap, to do something that your father and my father couldn’t, to capture the last ghost of Ohara!”

Nodding, Kalifa guessed, “So you wish me to get confirmation that Franky will know where those plans are?”

“Exactly!”

Her scowl disappearing, Kalifa thought about it then shrugged internally. In a way, he did have the right of it. They had assumed that Iceburg had given Cutty Flam the plans, but she hadn’t been able to overhear that conversation. *Which is probably why he’s contacting me and not the others. That lack is a mark on my record that I would like to see expunged.*

“Very well. I will see if I can question Iceburg after the battle has begun. Until then, sir,” with that, she clicked the off button for the Den Den Mushi and pushed it into her pocket once more, heading back out to wave down another yagura bull.

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Nero sat across from Blueno, winking at one of the train’s servers as she moved down the aisle. “They’re three carriages down.” He whispered in a low tone, his eyes flicking between his two partners for this little caper, “When do we attack?”

Blueno frowned, thinking about it, but this wasn’t the same Blueno that Water 7 knew as the happy, smiling bar owner of a back alley bar. He had slicked back his hair, abandoning the horns for now, and used a kind of pigments to darken his skin, so he looked like an entirely different person.

That, and he wore a suit. It felt good to wear a suit again, just like most government agents would, even without the lapels that would mark him out as one. Of course, CP9 members never wore that. Deniability was usually the name of the game for them. But the suit still felt good, as did finally leaving Water 7 behind them.

“We’ll hit them on the way back,” he finally decided.

“What, why?”

“Because that way, we can stack the deck further in our favor, idiot,” Blueno growled. “I was told about Sanji’s fighting level, and I’m not as sanguine as Jabra is that my ability with the Door Door fruit will allow me to fight him on an even footing. I’d rather tie up all three of the others with peons than the three of us go after Sanji alone.”

“Yoyoi, this sounds like a good plan, but I do not know how many people we will be able to gather. The island we are heading towards is an extremely civilized one, and there might not be much of a marine or very World Government presence there. Yoyoi!”

“We will have time to set something up,” Blueno replied, confident. “Remember, if nothing else, we can have Enies Lobby send us troops. They would have to come by ship, but between us, we can sabotage the train just in case.”

“Hmm... I suppose that works,” Nero muttered, although, of all of them, he was the most arrogant in thinking that their mastery of the Rokushiki would put them above and beyond any pirates who had merely dabbled in it. And, unlike the others, he didn’t know how big a difference there was between Busoshoku and the Rokushiki. “Pity, that Nami girl,” Nero chuckled with a little leer in his voice. “She is a looker.”

Rolling his eyes, Blueno leaned back, frowning as he made plans.

OOOOOO

Luffy frowned, staring ahead of them as the ship slowly wound its way back to once more dock in the cove that the locals called the unimaginative name of ‘Pirate’s Cove.’ Going the other way would have put them in the area where the more law-abiding customers could dock or take possession of their ships and Luffy had been tempted to go that way to mess up any attempt to isolate them. But that could badly backfire, and Luffy had decided not to do it.

He really, **really** didn’t like what was going on here, but he didn’t have enough information to decide if he and his crew were simply susceptible scapegoats or were the actual target of this disaster. “It’s not paranoia if someone really is out to get you. But are we the targets here? I want to act rather than react, but... fuck, I was a bloody idiot to send Sanji and the rest away.”

“Yeah, you might have been,” Laki answered him, which made Luffy start, not having noticed that he had spoken aloud. “But from what I understand, we can still get in touch with them, right? At least warn Sanji and the others?”

“Yeah, You’re right about that.” Suddenly realizing there was something he could do besides worry, Luffy turned the ship over to Zoro, adding, “Just don’t change course, Zoro, that’s all I ask. I don’t want to see if your direction curse can extend to our ship.”

“Oy!” Zoro grunted, punching Luffy’s shoulder as he moved away, entering the kitchen, while Robin chortled and Chopper just nodded his head sagely. Chopper had followed Zoro when the two of them were off the ship, only to become lost several times until Chopper took over directing them.

Inside the kitchen, Luffy paused, staring at the table and remembering the ahem, moment he and Robin had shared before shaking his head, moving to the primary Den Den Mushi. With it, he could reach all the other paired snails the crew had. Using it now, he called Sanji and informed him and the others what had happened since they had left.

Franky's voice took over from the cook at one point. "I hate to say it, but could Robin really have attacked Iceburg? You're super, Straw Hat, but the woman has a history, you know?"

"I know, and I know that when that history began, she was a nine-year-old girl attempting to survive on her own in the Grand Line," Luffy nearly snarled, although hearing Nami and the others taking Franky to task was amusing and calmed him down a bit. "I know she couldn't have gotten out of bed the night before without me knowing about it. That's enough for me."

"Gah, damn you captain, that, why did you have to say that? Even knowing you two are together is painful enough," Sanji whined, although Luffy could detect a slight bit of self-deprecating humor there, which he was happy to hear. "Still, you think we might be the target of this, whatever it is?"

"I'm saying that with our luck, we may be the target here. If so, this new enemy hasn't moved against the ship yet, but that means they might target you or Zoro and his group when they leave. I just have no idea who is behind all this. If I did, we could do something beyond wait here for the next shoe to fall," Luffy couldn't help but grumble.

"True enough. Still, we'll be on the lookout, captain. Don't worry."

Nodding, Luffy spent a few minutes talking to the group about other things before Zoro's shout told him they were entering the Pirate's Cove. Signing off with Sanji, Luffy heading outside, watching as they entered the small cove.

"Do you think we should tie up to the pier,?" Robin asked.

"No," Luffy answered instantly. "We'll keep going forward until we're within cannon range of not only the ships but the cove, then drop anchor. You'll need to take the ship's boat, but that'll let us have some room to maneuver."

Resolve hopped out of the woodwork nearby, frowning. "Captain, I have to protest the way you said that. It sounds as if you want to fire on the people here!"

"Nope. In fact, we'll be heading prow on towards the docks when you drop the anchor. But put a spring on it so that we can shift the ship around more easily. This is called preparation, I don't want something to happen but I want to be prepared for when it does."

“When it does,” the Klabautermann muttered, before nodding, saluting sharply, and disappearing again. Soon after, he helped Zoro launch the ship’s boat, then wished him, Chopper and Robin luck. He only kissed Robin, though, smiling at her as he pulled back. “For luck, yeah?” As Robin rolled her eyes at that, he became serious. “Keep an eye out, and don’t be afraid to cut and run if you have to. Your lives matter way more than staying here does. If push comes to shove, we can just move to intercept the sea train and pick up the others that way.”

Robin nodded, leaned in and kissing him once more, thrilling in that act. Being so open, so **affectionate**, was well beyond the few relationships she’d been in before. “We’ll be back, don’t worry. And I will take those kisses as a down payment for more in the future.”

“Whenever you want them however long you want,” Luffy said, flushing a bit as he realized what his words could imply. Robin giggled even as she lifted herself over the side, dropping down onto the boat, landing easily. With Zoro rowing them, the trio meeting with Iceburg moved off, with Luffy watching them go before he shook his head and turned to look over at Laki.

“Laki, you have everything you need...” Luffy began before trailing off as he watched her bouncing through the air up to the crow’s nest. “I didn’t see you put on your skates.”

Nod even turning around to address him, Laki waved a hand in response as she alighted on the top of the mast for a moment. “Put ‘em on while you were having your romantic moment there, captain. I’ve got a few other tricks, too, although it’s a shame. A lot of the things that Franky and I talked about last night would take days to fix up.”

Luffy shrugged. “You go into battle with what you have, not with what you need.”

Coming back down, Laki nodded, and Luffy noticed she had left her gun up in the crow’s nest and what looked like a bag of dials hanging on the crow’s nest’s outer wall. “Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be prepared. “You going to help or just stand there watching?”

Rolling his eyes, Luffy moved towards her, seeing that she had left an even larger bag of dials at the base of the mainmast. *Cripes, I really am worried about what is going on here, if I’m missing stuff like that.* “What do you want me to do?”

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On the casino's roof where he was waiting for his part in turning the talk between the pirates and Iceburg into a battle, Jabra opened up his Den Den Mushi. "Admiral Onigumo. Are you and your ships moving?"

"Do not question me or my abilities, assassin," growled the return voice. "We will be there soon."

"I just want to make certain that this battle goes off without a hitch, that's all," Jabra soothed. "Against an opponent like this crew, we all need to do our part. The ship and the captain are yours. We'll handle the first mate and the rest of the crew."

"See that you do. You realize that a Buster Call is not normally a precision instrument? This idea of us attacking a single pirate vessel is ridiculous."

Jabra shrugged and, on the other end and the Den Den Mushi the same. "You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs."

Staring down at the device, Onigumo smiled thinly. "We understand each other then." He then clicked off the device, staring up at his flagship's captain. "How long before were in sight of the island?"

The Marines had been hanging out at the edge of the island's Weather Zone, out of sight but close enough to close in quickly.

"An hour or so, then it will take us 15 minutes to get to the mouth of the Pirate's Cove," Captain Shu replied. His wardrobe was a little odd for a marine, a veil and a turban, but when they first met, Onigumo had learned enough about him and his Rust Fruit power to cut the man some slack.

"Pirate Cove," Onigumo mused, scowling. "The locals are so lost to justice that they have a specific cove just for pirates." He then sneered. "Well, I suppose if anyone is caught within the port, they will have already proven their guilt. Make certain that the captains and the other vice admirals are ready to combat the enemy's Haoshoku, and the ear cutters have been handed out among the crews.

"The crews will be using them shortly, but surely the Haoshoku isn't that dangerous?"

Onigumo scowled as it seemed for a moment that Shu was questioning orders. But then he shrugged, knowing the man was simply asking a good question. "I don't know. I have never faced a pirate who could use it. It is extremely rare after all, although I have trained against Sengoku's use of it in the past. It will not matter. Whatever happens, we will not be letting the Straw Hat Luffy survive to see the sunset. For Absolute Justice!"

The captain nodded firmly, and the six bombard-style battleships continued on their way, slowly closing with Water 7.

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At the front of the yagura bull pulling their boat ever higher into Water 7, Chopper looked around in some dismay at the looks they were getting. "I thought what we had been getting this morning was bad. This is worse. It's almost like they all hate us now!" he whimpered. This was way too much like before he had met Doctor Hiluluk and had been trying to befriend both reindeers and humans, only to be rejected by both.

"Like I said before, Chopper. If we couldn't stand to be hated, we wouldn't've become pirates," Zoro ruffling the reindeer's hair. "You'll face moments like this a lot as a pirate, just because you sail under the skull and crossbones."

"True enough," Robin muttered. "Although I rather prefer to be somewhat anonymous when I travel, so being glared at like this is not something I am used to either."

Zoro grunted, not paying attention to the people around him or the conversation anymore. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, put one hand on the hilts of his swords and closed his eyes. "Wake me up when we get there."

"Wait, you're seriously going to and he's out..." Chopper trailed off, staring at Zoro as he began to snore. "I didn't know humans could fall asleep so fast until I met Zoro, you know?"

"I rather think that swordsman-san has a sleeping disorder. Perhaps you could proscribe him some caffeine pills?" Robin quipped. "I wonder what he would do if he suddenly couldn't take his random naps throughout the day. Or rather, what he would be like."

Chopper laughed at that but his heart wasn't in it. The feeling of the city around him was really getting to him now and having Zoro out of it like he wasn't helping. Still, Robin kept talking to him, trying to keep Chopper's spirits up as they continued on their way.

The mayor met them outside of his mansion, which was smart, Zoro reflected as he was woken up by a slap to the face from a conjured arm. "This way, everyone can see what's going on," he said as he yawned before moving to take up a position in front of the other two. "Call the captain, Chopper."

"Indeed, I rather doubt there is going to be any talk about us threatening him, not with several dozen shipwrights surrounding him on all sides, looking remarkably belligerent for people whose livelihoods are to build things," Robin replied while Chopper pulled out the Den Den Mushi and called the ship.

“Heh, remember that they are also Water 7’s militia and that hammering nails isn’t all that different from hammering people.” Despite that observation, the majority of people Zoro could see were actually not wielding hammers. Some had giant saws, a few had real swords, others wrenches. More than half of the audience had pistols, and two larger than average men seemed to have portable cannons. They reminded Zoro of the Burn Bazooka Wiper had used, although he doubted these shot bursts of superheated air. *I hope so anyway.*

While Zoro was impressed and Robin slightly mocking, Chopper paused, staring at the crowd as he put the Den Den Mushi away. “Er, are we sure this is a good idea?”

“I rather think that it is the only idea open to us at present, Doctor-san.” So saying, Robin marched forward into the front lawn of the mansion until she was within hailing distance of the mayor. There, she held her hands up in the air, showing she was not armed. *Hehe, armed, I suppose I am always ready to be as ‘armed’ as anyone could possibly be.*

Shaking her head at that thought, Robin began to speak, her voice carrying to Iceburg and the surrounding shipwrights. “Mr. Mayor, I understand that some allegations have been cast at my feet? I am here to disprove them, as you agreed I could, when you spoke to my captain, Straw Hat Luffy...” She then waited, a wry twist to her lips before going on. “Mr. Mayor, I am willing to talk as long as you need to realize that my voice is not the one my captain said you heard last night.”

“You could have changed it, Nico Robin,” Iceburg shouted back, although Zoro noted that he nodded to two of the other four men around him, who relaxed visibly. That relaxation passed through the whole crowd, and Iceburg turned his attention back to Robin. “One more test, please. And then I have a few questions for you.”

Robin frowned at that but shrugged her shoulders. “I’m going to make arms up here from my shoulder. If you would please watch, and tell me what you see.”

Everyone there tensed, but Robin did just precisely what she had said she would. Two arms appeared from her shoulder, waving along with her normal arm to make her look like some kind of spider-woman before the extra two arms disappeared. Both appearance and disappearance were accompanied by the usual petals.

Seeing that, Iceburg seemed to sag. *Even as tired as I was last night, I would’ve noticed petals.* “Alright, perhaps you don’t have anything to do with the attack on me, but I still have...”

Before he could finish the sentence, Zoro twitched to one side, staring up at the nearby rooftop as his danger sense, the same that told him Rob Lucci was more dangerous than the other men around him, warned him of something else.

Yet before even Zoro could do more than grab at his swords, a shot rang out. From the same rooftop Zoro had been looking toward, a bullet flew. It hit Iceburg, punching straight through a set of under-armor he was wearing into his stomach.

“UGGH!!!” Iceburg gasped, blood flowing from his mouth as he collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut.

Instantly Chopper panicked, staring around at the crowd of stunned shipwrights. “D. doctor, get a doctor!”

Zoro had barely a moment to kick him in the rear and shout, “Oy, that’s you, Chopper!” before he finished, pulled out two of his swords and crossed them in front of him to block a blow from Rob Lucci, which forced him back several feet.

“They shot Iceburg. Take them!” shouted Kalifa, Kaku and Rob’s pigeon.

“That’s funny. You seem remarkably certain of that.” Zoro drawled, his eyes lighting up with battle light.

All around them, the shipwrights, still on hair triggers despite the moment of relief earlier, launched themselves forward. The ones who put themselves between the dying Iceburg and the three pirates were met by Chopper as he transformed into his monster form, smashing them out of the way to get to Iceburg.

But he had already been scooped up by Kalifa, who was running back into the mansion, and now Lulu, Tilestone, and Paulie getting in the way, although all three of them were looking confused. The suddenness of the attack, coupled with how quickly their fellows reacted, was throwing them off.

Robin had also reacted, trusting Zoro to protect himself. She clapped her hands together. “Doce Fleur Submission!”

Nearly the entire crowd of shipwrights collapsed then, arms around their necks starting to choke them into unconsciousness, a softer, less-lethal or crippling version of the clutch. Then Kaku was in her face, lashing out with a kick.

She dodged, pulling herself out of the way through a series of arms that acted like a rope, pulling her up and onto a nearby roof, only to be met there by another man. He was a tall man with a scar on his face, a long mustache and groomed beard, with a wild, sneering expression.

“Hah! That’s right, babe! Come to daddy!” Jabra howled, lashing out with a punch aimed at the side of her head.

Robin barely dodged his attack, which would have laid her out, she was sure, then intoned "Tekkai!" Like the rest of the crew, she could now use rudimentary Tekkai, and that came in handy here, causing the man's blow to simply knock her off her feet without doing any damage. Robin then rolled, standing up once more, balancing on the edge of the roof.

He snorted, clicking his fingers. "Damn, you couldn't make this easier on yourself?" So saying, the long-haired man tossed aside the barrel of wine he'd been drinking, wiping at his face and then without warning spitting at her intending to blind her.

But Robin still had her arms crossed, allowing her to concentrate on her powers. Now several dozen hands appeared, one thrusting forward from her chest while the others came out of the edge of it like a fan shifting this way and that to block the alcohol. Others grabbed at his legs at the same time and he looked down with a bemused expression before stamping on them. However, before he could get free, she was away, the arms disappearing as Robin leaped to another roof.

There, she ran smack dab into another man, whose looks were even more bizarre. He was an equally large man as the scarred man, yet had an almost ovoid body and a wide mouth. Whose lips, Robin noted, had been replaced by a zipper. He had green hair, although he looked to be going bald, and small arms and legs compared to the rest of him. Although as he reached for her, the shortness of those limbs didn't seem to be slowing him down enough. "Chapapa Chapapa, you will not escape!"

A blow took her in the side of the head, but Robin had spent so much time training with Luffy that her basic durability was quite high. The blow staggered her, but Robin was able to concentrate still on her powers, and hands formed from the wall behind her reaching off and over the lip of the rooftop, grabbing Robin and pulling her down.

"Keep after her Fukuro, I'm going to try and get ahead of her," Jabra ordered, turning to leap up and towards the top of Dock 1's doorway.

At this order, the fat man came after her, only to be caught in a web of hands.

Robin had created a net over her as she fell. It was only then that Fukuro noticed that on top of up hands, Robin had created dozens of eyes everywhere, watching everything, controlling her reactions using an Ojos Fleur.

However, Fukuro had a response to this net defense. "Soru Tekkai Dama!" His body solidified with the Tekkai ability, but he also used Soru to send himself straight down. This essentially made his body a huge cannonball.

The attack nearly caught Robin, despite the net, but the net tightened, becoming several hundred hands grasping and holding him in place. But since Fukuro was still using Tekkai no matter how many arms Robin used to try to twist him into a pretzel to no avail.

Yet Robin was now away, racing into the dockyard. *I need distance and time. Whoever that is, I don't think he's with the Galley-La company. So he won't know his way around this place and if I can separate them...*

Meanwhile, Kaku and the other foremen had joined the assault on Zoro and Chopper.

Chopper had, the days before coming to this island, finally begun to develop Tekkai in his normal Monster body and took several blows from Lulu, punching out once, his blow laying out the man, then holding up his hand to meet the hammer of the other man, which shattered on impact with his raised fist. Paulie then tried to trap him with his ropes. "Rope Action: Bowline Knot!"

But Chopper proved stronger, not even budging as he thrust himself backward, pulling Paulie towards him. When the man tried to release his ropes from whatever contraption they were connected to in his sleeves, Chopper grabbed him, shouting in his face, "Dammit, it wasn't us! I'm a doctor. I don't kill unless I have to save someone else! Now let me see him! That was a gut shot. He'll bleed out in ten minutes or less if we don't get him some expert medical attention. Do you have doctors waiting in there?! If not, I'm his only hope!"

Paulie gulped but nodded. He knew the same thing and had even seen people die from such wounds before. And they didn't have any doctors nearby, having wanted only combatants present to meet with Nico Robin and her accomplices. *But, but they were all looking surprised, weren't they? SO unless, well, they could be good actors, but this guy, he doesn't seem the type.* "R, right, just realize, if you do anything more to him, we won't hesitate to attack you again."

Inside the mansion, Kalifa was doing what she could to keep Iceburg alive, although she was startled when Iceburg began to mumble. "N, no, no, it wasn't her... Petals don't match, would've noticed. The Straw Hats, they, they don't even have a marksman."

Since Laki had yet to be given a bounty, no one knew about her skill set. Indeed, even Hina hadn't had much of an idea of what she brought to the table, bar the basics of Sky Combat that she had seen during their stay in Skypiea. And as for Makino, while she had been with the crew longer, she too had yet to be given a bounty. And Hina had barely mentioned the other woman, using that, in a way, to salve her wounded conscience from giving the marines so much information about Luffy.

Hmm, it seems as if the jig is up then. For a moment, Kalifa debated what to do. She could break cover, demand answers from Iceburg in return for keeping him alive. But she had come to know Iceburg rather well in her time as his secretary. *He is just the kind of hard-driving, determined bastard to die without giving me the answer just to spite me.*

She was still debating what to do when Chopper burst into the mansion's foyer, pulling out a medical bag from somewhere, while Paulie followed him, looking pale with concern.

“Wh, where did that come fr, I mean, what is he doing here, Paulie?!” Kalifa shouted, leaping in front of Iceburg and keeping in character for now.

“He says he’s a doctor, and while Kaku and Rob are certain that it was the Straw Hats who shot Iceburg, I saw their faces. They were all shocked. Even Robin. And, and we can’t get Iceburg to a doctor in time to save him, Chopper’s our only chance to save Iceburg-san!” Paulie replied, staring down at his boss and, for once, not making any comment about Kalifa’s sexy secretary look.

That actually annoyed Kalifa somewhat, but her scowl was caused by much more than that minor matter. *It looks as if the locals aren’t quite as credulous as we hoped. But that hardly matters now.* “Very well, you can look at him. But I will be watching you, and if you even look to be hurting him more than you need to order to treat his wound, I will kick your head off.

Undeterred, Chopper nodded and instantly sat down next to Iceburg, where he pulled out several dozen instruments as well as a needle with a syringe. This he put into Iceburg’s chest, right above where he had been shot. “That should deaden the pain in the area,” he muttered, pulling out some gauze, strips of long thread, and a pair of small pliers while he explained what he was doing in the interest of not getting his head kicked off. “But I have to make certain I need to get the bullet out. Then I’ll have to perform surgery on his intestines. That isn’t going to be pleasant. He’ll need something to bite down on.”

Paulie instantly pulled out more of his ropes from his wrists, putting a portion in his boss’s mouth. “Don’t be afraid to bite down boss, you’re going to be all right.”

“He will be or else,” Kalifa growled.

Outside, Zoro backpaddled with Rob and Kaku pushing him joined by Tilestone and several of the other shipwrights, while Zoro slowly retreated. That last proved to be a liability, though, and as Lulu fell, unconscious thanks to a backhanded blow from Yubashiri, his body got tangled in the legs of several of the others, letting Zoro dash to one side. “Oni Giri!” The attack lashed out, catching several of his attackers and hurling them up and off their feet, getting in the way of the other two and letting Zoro hop up onto the mansion’s outer wall.

Before the other two could get through the aerial debris of their fellows, Zoro had his last sword out, flipping Wado Ichimonji up and to catch with his mouth. The next second he twirled like a top, shouting out “A Hundred-and-twenty Pound Cannon!”

The swirling mass of air looked like a circular saw made out of air as it flashed out. Rob and Kaku had no choice but to dodge, using Geppo to get away, the blast continuing on to take off a chunk of the mayor’s mansion, shredding it entirely while the two CP9 members bounced up and over the mansion’s outer wall, landing next to Zoro as he had leaped down, moving to follow after Robin.

Seeing this, Zoro's eyes narrowed, and he paused, pulling the white sword out of his mouth as he stared up at where the two were hopping in midair now. "Now isn't that interesting, since according to my captain, only really high-ranking members of the Marines or government officials know the Rokushiki. I think I'm getting a picture of what's really going on here."

"And you think that will help?" Rob snorted as he alighted on the grass of the mansion's front yard once more. He was also speaking with his own mouth this time rather than through his pigeon, relieved to **finally** shed his disguise. With that, he looked over at Kaku. "I'm done playing. Stay out of my way if you can't keep up."

As Kaku snorted at his colleague's blunt tone, Rob Lucci's body began to change. "You might have a Zoan type on your crew and maybe have even seen a few Zoan types before. But I'll wager none of them were predators. I, I am a jaguar!"

"Don't expect me to do the same just yet," Kaku muttered from where he had also set himself down on the ground.

"The more you use it, the more you'll get used to it," Rob said.

But Zoro had finally had enough of waiting. He charged forward, crossing the distance quickly, his own version of Soru covering the distance swiftly.

Rob had barely a second to pull his head back and a slash that would have taken his head off instead left a thin trail of blood across his chest. He stared as Zoro used Soru once more to retreat few paces, keeping both his attackers in sight as he smirked at them around the hilt of Wado Ichimonji. "Heh, you think I fucking care about your Zoan type? I'm the man who will be the greatest swordsman in the world. No way will I ever be scared of some big pussy cat."

Snorting, Rob cracked his neck explosively, then crouched, dark amusement flickering in his eyes. "Famous last words, Pirate Hunter."

OOOOOOO

Luffy stared out and upwards towards Water 7, scowling.

"What's wrong?" Laki asked, hopping down from the crow's nest when she saw Luffy standing at the ship's prow. Their preparations had been finished for a while now and both of them had simply been waiting for events to go wherever they would.

"I don't like it. We just heard from Zoro and the others that they saw Iceburg waiting for them. That was twenty minutes ago. Nothing since?"

“And you can’t feel them out with your what do you call it, Kenbunshoku? Really, I think Mantra is just a much better than that,” Laki joked, trying to buck Luffy’s spirits up, unused to seeing him so concerned.

It didn’t work, however, and Luffy continued to stare up at the city of gleaming marble and fountains with a look that made it clear he was wondering if the pristine view was actually that of a battlefield. “I’ve tried to use Kenbunshoku twice since eating the Goro Goro Devil Fruit. It gives me a freaking headache that puts me on my ass for a few minutes. I gotta think that the way I’m doing it is just wrong or something at this point, but I...”

Luffy was interrupted by the sounds of cannon fire. He turned quickly, staring out towards the entrance to the cove while cannon rounds began to thunder down all around the ship. There, in the entrance to the cove, two giant marine battleships had appeared.

These were true bruisers too, bigger and heavier than any ship Luffy had seen since being on his grandfather’s ship when he was younger. The Red Force had been similarly sized, but it lacked the massive turrets these ships had at the front and back, along with the larger gunwales. Those turrets marked these ships out as bombard-type ships, and they turned towards the Resolve, firing as they came straight in. They weren’t in range yet of the marine’s broadsides, but even so, those guns were more than big enough to sink Resolve in a few salvos.

“Fuck me,” Luffy grunted, scowling as he stared at the ships and what they implied. “This was a trap for us after all!”

“No, thank you, you’re not my type,” Laki murmured, peering towards the ships with the scope on her rifle. “Swivels, huh? I like that, but they look a little too bulky for swiveling to be their only trick.”

“Good thing then we’ve got some of our own, and now really isn’t the time to look for more ideas for the future. Let’s concentrate instead on having a future at all,” Luffy idly smashed a cannonball out of the air then bounced back to the end of the ship, barking out orders. “Resolve, turn the ship, one broadside, then pull up the anchor. We can’t fight battleships with us stuck in place!”

“Roger!” Resolve answered. Thanks to the spring on the cable, the ship turned quickly, bringing its broadsides to bear towards the mouth of the cove. But as it fired, the marine ship took their shots without pausing. The front of the bombard ships was built of heavy wood and the metal of the turrets, which foiled most of Resolve’s fire.

Despite that, Luffy was happy enough about the Klabautermann’s actions. The ship could indeed be of use on the gundeck during a battle. And Laki was now moving around the deck, activating a series of Iron Cloud dials.

Meanwhile, the cannonballs of the enemy were being blocked by Luffy, who smashed them out of the air, caught them and tossed them back, or kicked them straight up into the air only to have them fall back down elsewhere in the cove. But they couldn't let the enemy ships turn to bring their broadside to bear. If they did, Luffy knew even he wouldn't be able to defend against several hundred cannonballs at once.

Meanwhile, on the shore, the locals had also begun to move. Several dozen large cannons were being wheeled out of hidden culverts here and there throughout the port. Soon all of them were pointed in the direction of the pirate ship, firing towards them.

The other pirate vessels in port, of which there were nine, had also started to respond to the clear and present danger of the two marine vessels. While they hadn't come under any direct suspicion like the Straw Hats, most had still poised to leave rather than mess with the locals, thanks to a recent example of what could happen to a normal pirate crew who decided to try and cheat Galley-La out of its money. Those who hadn't had hunkered down elsewhere in town, not going out from their hotels.

Now two of those ship caravels, smaller than the Resolve, put to sea quickly. However, one of them proved to have extremely bad luck as a stray cannonball, kicked by Luffy, caught it right on its mast. Other stray cannonballs were slamming into the ocean all around the Straw Hat's ship.

The other, though, continued on, trying to break out to open water, daring the guns of the marine vessel as it closed. There just wasn't enough room to maneuver in the harbor to allow them to fight marine battleships on an even footing. Not that many of the ships in the port would even try.

Two more ships joined the first. Then another, but this last ship took fire from the shore, lost one of its masts, and was holed near the waterline. It was forced to stop in place, turning, and firing towards the Marines as the Resolve had, while its crew desperately tried to keep the ship afloat.

In response, the two marine vessels had split off, turning in place, their turrets still tracking towards the Straw Hat's ship, while their broadsides were brought to bear. Luckily for Luffy and the Resolve, they split their fire, the marines unwilling to let any pirates escape, not just their targets.

So busy were Luffy and Laki fighting against the incoming fire, though, that the first warning Luffy got of the threat from behind them was Resolve shouting, "Captain, enemies from the shore!"

Turning that way, Luffy saw more cannonballs coming their way from the shore. At the same time, more fire came from out past his line of vision, arcing up and over the two marine ships in sight. A lot more fire. Luffy estimated that there had to be at least eighteen to twenty

more cannons out there firing up and over the two marine ships, which were now moving to shift sideways, blocking the entrance.

“SHiTT!” Laki shouted, staring up at it. “That’s why those turrets are so large. They can elevate too! Arcing fire!”

And like most ships, the Resolve’s main deck was a lot thinner than the ship’s sides. Instantly Luffy had to choose, take the fire from the port defenders or the Marines, but knowing that, the choice was easy. He decided to take the fire from the guns the locals were firing at them. They weren’t nearly as large as the main guns on Marine battleships.

Leaping up into the air via Geppo, Luffy lashed out with legs and arms, “Rankyaku Storm!” He blocked most of the incoming fire, but one of the arcing shots got through directly above him. The hit smashed into and through the main deck and all the way down to the gun deck.

“GAAAAH, okay, that hurt! I feel the pain if I can’t pull my willpower away from the area fast enough. OWW!” Resolve growled. But it was the growl of anger and rising wrath instead of simple pain.

Laki slammed her hand down on the last Iron Cloud dial on that side of the ship, twitching around and racing to the other side. Four had been knocked out of position, but now they were working together to create a mass of Iron Cloud to cover both sides of the ship. It wouldn’t last long. The pressure on the Blue Sea was such that cloud-creations couldn’t sustain themselves, but the dials could be set on an always-on position to keep them in place for longer. What that would do to the dials, she didn’t know, but Laki guessed it wouldn’t be good.

“Captain, the chains been pulled in by your orders!” Resolve shouted, the Klabautermann appearing out of sight in the Crow’s Nest.

“Get us moving. I don’t care how or where. We’ll turn for the entrance to the port with the other pirates around us, use them as cover,” Luffy ordered, cursing himself even as he used a Rankyaku to explode an incoming warhead from above. A lot of his tricks and abilities were useful more in one-on-one combat, and this wasn’t that kind of a fight. He could close with both vessels considering they were somewhat close together but that would leave the much more dangerous arcing fire free to pummel the Resolve from beyond his sight.

As good a job as Laki’s dials were doing, they didn’t have enough Iron Cloud dials to protect the ship entirely. But getting out of the port and into open water would allow them to close with those enemy ships while letting them use the Resolve’s quickness to better advantage.

At least, Luffy hoped it would. *This is only my third ship-to-ship engagement, after all, and the others were kind of limited in comparison!*

“Aye aye, captain!” Resolve replied, and the ship quickly made way, cutting through the water as fast as the jet dials could carry it. Now a moving target, the ship instantly took less fire than before, but the marines responded to this by simply throwing more metal their way. The still-unseen ships started to fire faster and one of the marine ships in sight turned their guns toward the ship.

Racing forward, Laki grabbed up an Iron Cloud dial from the side facing into the port, shifting it so that it created a shield along the prow. As she did, she roared out a suggestion, raising her voice loudly enough for Luffy to hear from his position in the air over the ship. “We could take the shoreline under fire! Hell, I could probably shoot at some of them myself. It would maybe break up the attack on us from that angle.”

Luffy thought about it for a solid second but then shook his head firmly, raising his voice to be heard over the growing tumult of battle. “No. We’re already being lambasted for what we didn’t do. Let’s not give them any real reasons to hate us.”

“Besides,” he said, leaping out from the top of the mast and kicking a shell that was coming down from on high, “I think we’ve got more than enough problems already.” Luffy then grabbed one cannonball out of the air and hurled it down with punishing force towards one of the ships.

He stayed up there for a second, thinking as he looks at the battlefield, then dropped back down to issue new orders, seeing the surviving pirate ships moving towards the marine ships at the entrance. “Resolve, turn us about and head towards the mouth of the cove, hug the right side of the cove. “Laki, get up into the crow’s nest, and start sniping at any officers you see when we close.”

“Roger, Luffy,” Laki said, bouncing up towards the crow’s nest. There she grabbed her rifle, which she had left there earlier, putting it to her shoulder and staring towards the marine vessels. Then Laki began to fire. The rifle wasn’t as long-range as it should be, but now that they were closing, she could see individual targets and began to pick them off.

Four marines went down, one of them from a head shot and another from a shot to the stomach, while the third somehow dodged her shot only to fall over the side of their ship. And these were not the soft, rounded seeds that she had used before when training the rest of the crew. No, these were the equivalent of real bullets. The tips of the seeds she was using had been worked down to a point like a bullet, rather than cylindrical like a musket ball.

One of the men she took down was a captain, and he had apparently been able to use Tekkai right before the impact, as he got up and then collapsed to one side, his eyes rolling back in his head. Even Tekkai couldn’t protect entirely from that much impact right to your brain. A user’s skull would be fine, the brain, not so much. Yet the ship kept moving, slowly twisting to one side to better block the entrance to the Pirate Cove.

Now with its bow pointing towards the enemy, and one of the pirate vessels between it and the marine ship on the port side of the entrance to the cove, none of the ship's guns could bear just yet. But it also narrowed the frontage for a moment that could be hit in turn. And the two visible marine ships were now being viciously attacked by the pirates who had broken away from the docks. The two pirate ships that had fallen behind were now burning merrily, and the locals had shifted their fire to them to finish them off.

The third pirate vessel to the port side quickly caught fire, slowly sinking and thus moving its protection from the fire coming from the ship on the other side of the entrance. But the Resolve was now almost to the Marine battleships. Some of its guns under Resolve's command were also firing back, doing more damage now. The Klabautermann aimed for the rigging and decks on Luffy's orders, although, unlike the marine's main batteries, there was only so high the ship could angle its fire.

Luffy was everywhere at once, bouncing all around the ship. He couldn't attack yet. Instead, he had to keep concentrating on blocking cannonball after cannonball, using a mixture of Rankyaku, Geppo, and Soru to good effect. Even so, there were only so many places he could be at once, and worse, he could only look in one direction, broadly speaking. With fire coming from on high and still from the wharves behind them, Luffy knew that the Resolve was taking hits.

From here, he could see holes in its side, deck, and the small foremast had been shattered. Thanks to the fact they had the sails rolled up, it had fallen away cleanly. The one blow to the main deck was much worse.

However, worse was to come. "Captain!" Laki shouted. "Look to the port, far side of the fight! There's something in the water."

Luffy looked in that direction and was astonished to find that the second caravel, which had taken to sea fastest was still afloat. Indeed, it didn't seem to have men taken more than a few hits. It had moved around the two marines and was now making for open ocean much like the Resolve was doing: passing around the prow of one of the marine's ships. But whereas Luffy had waited for the other pirates to put some of their ships in between him and the marines, the crew of the caravel hadn't. It was now almost to the marine vessels.

At first, Luffy didn't realize why Laki called his attention to the ship, assuming it would be sunk by the other side of the marine's broadside. But instead, Luffy saw something almost silvery resting on the ocean just as the ship, which had slowed, was drawn into it. A millisecond later, an explosion below the water line blew up the ship, causing the small ship to sink quickly.

"Good eyes, Laki!" Luffy turned his attention forward, seeing something similar a silvery line of something on the ocean several hundred yards ahead of the marine ships. *That's why they didn't come in after us, maybe. Something the locals cooked up to keep us here, mines?*

Regardless, they were not going to stop him and his ship. As they closed with the same whatever that had done a large portion of that damage, Luffy used a Rankyaku to slice into the sea at that point. The attack cut through a series of wires that had been pulled up to float just beneath the surface of the water from one side to the other of the entrance.

Looking at it through her scope Laki could see it was connected to a series of mines, and the strings seemed to be rubber or something similar. Seeing that, Laki knew that when a ship hit the floating wire, the mines were pulled up into the ship.

Turning her attention to the side of the Resolve, not having seen any officers worth her time, Laki saw that the large walls of Iron Cloud were still holding. For now. That was probably the best she could do on that front, and Laki turned her attention to shooting at random marines on the closest ship. Specifically, anyone who moved to take control of the wheel. The enemy ship had dropped two anchors and wasn't going anywhere yet but she figured it might turn after them if someone could take command of it now that its captain was out of the fight. After all, she'd already shot down the few marksmen on the other ship who had taken to the masts.

But then Laki shifted her line-of-sight when she spotted someone else of interest. The man who had grabbed Laki's attention was dressed like a normal marine, but he had a Den Den Mushi to his mouth and a pair of binoculars to his face. That seemed odd enough to Laki to send a bullet his way, sending him flying backward with a cry of agony at the shot to his chest, which ended abruptly.

"Captain, we're coming up to the front of the enemy ship. But if they can get those main guns to bear on us at this range, it will go right through me!" Resolve shouted.

"I've got it covered, Resolve. Just keep going. We need to get out into the open ocean and room to move!" With that, Luffy pulled out several nails from inside his ki pocket. He then held them in one hand, the fingers and palm of that hand hidden by the other, as they flickered with lightning unseen by those below him or indeed anyone else.

A second later, he sent five railgun quick rounds through the fire and smoke into the marine vessel on the other side. "Finger Bomb Rapid Fire!"

Each one crashed into the same target, the enemy's forward turret. Where they struck, the nails created holes about as wide as Luffy's palm straight through the device, and smoke began to billow out as the cannons slumped in their stands, something in their mechanisms breaking.

The next second, as the fire from on high stopped for just a second, Luffy began to pepper the ship further. *Laki must have taken out whoever was calling in the arcing fire! Time to take advantage of it and pray we can get some room to maneuver!* "Finger Bomb, Shotgun

Style!” With that, several dozen nails were sent towards the enemy vessel, where a large portion of the crew had waited to fire at the Resolve when it entered musket range.

Luffy’s attacks punctured people and deck with equal ease, bringing down tall three of the enemy’s masts, killing several of the Marines, and shattering the main deck, drilling downwards. He followed this up by a wide-angle Rankyaku that slashed into the enemy ship’s side, rupturing cannons and breaking boards when it hit.

The next second, Resolve’s broadside fired again. This time, it started to do some damage, hammering into the already damaged port side and prow of the enemy vessel. The Marines ship began to list badly, two holes near the water line causing water to flow into the ship uncontrollably.

With that, the Resolve was able to move around the enemy ship, racking it with fire. At Luffy’s order, it then broke off wildly to its starboard side, not trying to turn to port, which would have had them moving into the range of the undamaged broadside of the enemy vessel.

Yet as they cleared the port and Luffy could see through the rising smoke, he winced.

There were, in fact, four other massive bombard ships out there. And unlike the two ships sent in to help block the pirate’s escape, they had spread out in a wide circle. This let the Resolve have the room to move that Ranma had hoped for but also removed any hope of getting past them quickly. *FUCK. Let that be a lesson, old boy. Guns are really long-range weapons, the bigger, the longer ranged! Gah! Still, that just means we have to get closer.* But looking at the distant ships, he also saw people beginning to hop up into the air from them even as the ships closed, firing as they came in with their main batteries.

But Ranma was not someone who stayed still when people were attacking. *Heh, no plan survives contact with the enemy, fuckers. Let’s see who can ride the chaos of this fight more, you with your numbers or me!* “Evasive action on max, Resolve. Beyond that, use your own discretion, you two. I’m going to get close and see if I can use the Haoshoku to hammer them.”

“Wait, what? I don’t have any discretion. I don’t even know what that word means!” Resolve shouted in reply from the inside of the crow’s nest.

“It means we are in charge of what we’re doing,” Laki explained helpfully, noting absently that three of the pirate ships had been able to follow them out of the port and were now trying to escape too. But then Ranma’s last sentence registered and she shivered. “Oh... well, fuck.”

“Finger bomb, shotgun-style!” Luffy launched that attack towards the Geppo users, and three of the marines coming towards him were struck. Only one of them, a man with a weird hat, had enough time to activate Tekkai, although he was still propelled backward and down by the impact. Another one didn’t and cried out in agony as his arm was literally amputated at the

elbow from the super-fast nail. The third was able to not only take the blow but deaden the momentum, then keep moving in, using Geppo and Soru to do so.

That worthy wore the coat and specialized under-suit of a vice-admiral. He also looked like he was a Zoan user, specifically a dalmatian dog, given the white fur, spots and half-dog head Ranma could make out even at long range.

The others all dodged, or in the case of one, reacted by using his Devil fruit to defend himself, coming apart in dozens of small ball-like things. However, this allowed Ranma to zoom past them using Soru and they all started to scramble away.

A second later, as he moved towards the nearest marine ship, the Haoshoku lashed out. The great beast was released from its shackles within Ranma, creating a visible wave of pressure and fear and **otherness** visible in the air around him, like ripples in a pond.

The Haoshoku's pressure hammered not only the nearest marines but everyone within a certain radius. Many of the marines had been prepared for this and had, on their officer's order, cut themselves on their thighs or arms in the hopes that the physical pain would help them through the mental impact of the Haoshoku. It had proven to do so occasionally in the past if the individual using pain was also of strong enough will.

Unfortunately, most of the marines and pirates caught in Ranma's Haoshoku lacked that will. Something that, in hindsight, should have been obvious to their officers. But if there was anything most marines of all ranks had in common, it was a certain institutional arrogance, and this bit them in the ass today.

The closest marine ship lost nearly its entire crew to Haoshoku-induced comas. Having just pulled up its twin anchors to shift position to move towards the target pirate ship, it was now drifting. Men fell out of the rigging, mostly to their deaths from that height. Men collapsed at their guns throughout the ship. Riflemen slumping against one another or down onto the main deck, their bodies actually helping a few of their fellows survive falling out of the rigging. They were still broken, but even that pain couldn't bring the affected marine's minds back to them.

Now with no one directing it, the wheel began to twist and turn, the ship haring off from where it should have been going.

The next closest ship had it nearly as bad. Although there, one officer, a first mate, was able to fight off the Haoshoku and starts to instantly wake up the other Marines, aided by a few who had similarly been able to use the pain they were already feeling to push through it.

Further away from Ranma, the technique started to lose its impact but every crew in the fight, pirate or marine, lost at least one out of every four crewmen. Even the people who were hopping towards him through the air felt it, halting their assault for just a second to shake their

heads, staring at Ranma as someone would when they walked down a hiking trail only to come face to face with a grizzly.

Then Ranma was in and past them, shooting down on the enemy ship. "Finger Bomb, Rapid Fire!"

His target was the same as it had been before, the main guns of the enemy ships. Ranma didn't really want to massacre the common marines. Unlike their officers, the rank and file marines were just following orders regardless of what those orders were. That made them more sheep than men in Luffy's eyes but that didn't mean that Luffy wanted to kill any more than he had to. He simply wanted to remove the main threat to his ship.

A second later, the first of the Commodores reached Ranma, lashing out through the air with a kick with a particularly good Rankyaku. But Ranma dodged under the blow, grabbed the man's leg and tossed him into his friend nearby while bouncing away, leaping up and over several of them.

Three of them used Soru to catch up, but Ranma matched them, using Soru in turn, while the other officers tried to circle him. One of them was a somewhat round-jawed fellow, with a scar on his face and an Afro.

Ranma singled him out as he attacked, launching two ki blasts his way. Between dodging around the attacks of other officers, he watched as the man came apart like Buggy to dodge the attack. At the same time, another captain launched some kind of green goop his way. "Acid Blow!"

"Oh, that's just great," Ranma muttered, "Devil fruit users gotta love it. Not."

"Indeed, I ate the Acid Spit fruit! I can spit out acid and even secrete it in my sweat!" that marine bragged.

"Like I care!" Ranma dodged his next attack, snorting as it nearly hit two of his fellows. He lashed out with a punch which smashed into another man's raised forearm, nearly breaking through the man's hasty Tekkai, well before he could launch what looked like some kind of bone spikes from his forearm.

Then Ranma dodged another punch followed by a kick from behind as he moved through this way and that through the battle. Not even looking back as he did so, he lashed out with a mule kick straight behind him, which caused the Marines to mutter out Tekkai as he raised a thigh to block the kick.

But the momentum of that allowed Ranma to shoot himself forward, bouncing around in among the Marines. *Time to mess with their minds further.*

“So, is there a specific reason for this, or are you assholes just taking advantage of things,” he drawled, dodging a punch and returning one, which was dodged in turn. All of the Marines around him had a good grasp of Geppo, although only one or two looked to be using the boneless almost-paper-like ability to dodge that was a sign of Kami-E.

That made sense to Ranma, since like Tekkai, it had a downside. When you just started out using Tekkai, you couldn't move while doing so. It was only as your mastery with it became more smooth and automatic that you could start to move. With Kami-E, you couldn't use it in conjunction with any of the other techniques. The lack of mental focus and extreme use of instinctual responses was too much to work with any other Rokushiki. *Although, I think I'm noticing something here. Heh, this might not be as bad as I feared it was...*

“For Absolute Justice, you will die today!” exclaimed one of them who looked almost like a gorilla without the hair.

This earned the man a kick in the face. “Yeah, that same old refrain, newsflash morons, justice isn't always absolute, certainly not your form of it anyway. And I don't see how framing us with assassinating Iceburg serves Justice in any way, shape or form.”

As Ranma pulled his foot away, the man looked as if Ranma had blasphemed against his god or perhaps passed gas very loudly in a cathedral, shock and disdain turning rapidly to hate and fury. Which was just what Ranma wanted. With a snort and a middle finger, Ranma continued to bounce around, dodging every attack, taunting as he did. The Devil Fruit powers were weird, but most weren't all that impressive. Some had potential, but the marines weren't using them to the best effect, and the ‘Make Them Mad, Make Them Stupid technique’ was so very useful.

The man with a scar on his face and the Berry powers was back then, lashing out with a fist covered in Busoshoku, showing the first real threat to Ranma in this phase of the battle. Ranma blocked it with his own, lashing out with a kick that should've caught the guy in the head. But his head disconnected from the rest of them, and Ranma's foot sailed through the space it had previously occupied. Then that head flashed forward, glowing black. “Berry Buso-Barrage!”

This acted like a signal as two other commodores launched mid-range attacks with their Devil fruits as the others paused, pulling back warily. But not like it was a trained maneuver, Ranma noted, more like they were just piling in as best they could.

“Shari Shari Drill!” Another one attacked. His hands and indeed all of his arms had seemingly turned into small wheels, which began to spin wildly. Yet the man wasn't fast enough to land a real hit and seeing his wheels moving, Ranma figured that they weren't really spinning fast enough to hurt.

Another one seemed to have a touch-based power, lunging forward to grapple with Ranma. Which didn't work since Ranma was faster than him and able to dodge until the guy slammed into one of the other devil fruit users.

And yet again, another man seemed to be a simple boxer, though his punches were honestly quite hard. *Decent strength, but...* with that thought, Ranma redirected the blow, then tossed that man into another attacker. *Not enough speed and he seems to be only a boxer.*

Now certain his plan was going to work, Grabbing the man's head in his hands, his legs and feet lashed out, crashing into the body parts that were hurling towards him through the attacks of the other Devil fruit users and sending them every which direction into his fellow Marines, dodging them in turn. "Hah, thanks for the use of your body parts, moron!"

The ball-like body parts crashed into several of the attackers, hurling them backward and away from Ranma.

This caused a disruption that Ranma once again used to fire down below on one of the other ships, which he had been moving the fight toward.

And again, his target wasn't the entire ship, just its bombardment guns. "Finger Bomb, Rapid Fire!"

Below him, a man in a vice-admiral's uniform pulled out his sword, lashing out with his own edges, crashing into several of Ranma's nails, destroying them. But a few still got through, and the battleship's main guns were once more put out of commission.

However, this nearly cost Ranma, as a new voice shouted out, "Bladed Soul's Edge!"

This sent a very thin air attack towards Ranma like those Zoro could create. But instead of a spiral as Zoro preferred, this was a single edge, much like the officer below had been using, only far larger and aimed not to defend the ship but directly at Ranma. So fast that even Ranma couldn't dodge in time, busy as he had been with the enemy below.

Swiftly, Ranma's Busoshoku spread across his body a second before the attack lashed in. Clad thusly, Ranma turned in the direction of that attack, idly batting aside blow from another Commodore, hopping up and over another acid blast, which once more nearly hit the other marines while lashing out a punch to a third man who seemed able to create small air bursts of potentially devastating power. But when he looked in that direction, he saw not one new attacker but three, all wearing the uniform of vice-admirals. *Well, fuck. I knew it would happen, but that doesn't mean I was looking forward to it.*

Even so, Ranma could feel a boil of anticipation going through him, and he smiled viciously even as his Busoshoku faded out, Ranma being unwilling to exhaust himself just yet.

“You know, I always prefer to know the name of the people trying to kill me. Figure it’s just good manners to know what their name is when I kick their teeth in.”

Ranma trailed off, and the man who had launched the previous attack cocked an eyebrow, then shrugged. He was a somewhat average-sized man with a black mohawk and a mustache wearing a normal vice-admiral uniform. Underneath the coat, he wore a dark blue shirt. In his hand, he held a katana. “I am named Momonga, and I will end your threat to world peace today.” And then raised his blade, a longer than average katana, once more.

The man who looked like he had eaten some kind of dog-based Zoan fruit, growled as he cracked his knuckles. “And I am Dalmatian!”

“And I am Onigumo! You might have proven far more dangerous than we thought, but your piracy ends today, Straw Hat!” This man had the coldest, most angry face of the four, his eyes narrowed under heavy ridges. This wasn’t helped by his gray skin, or his ancient war helmet, under which his sneer bared his teeth.

Ranma smirked, racing forward through the air with Soru, shouting out, “Bring it!”

But a second after he charged, Ranma backpedaled, not only dodging another attack but elbowing one of the other commodores in the face. They weren’t retreating to let the vice-admirals fight him and Ranma very carefully did not cackle at that. No, Instead, he simply smirked and began to move into a spiral.

“Berry Berry Blast!” shouted the same voice as before.

This attack did cut off Ranma’s initial attempt to start his spiral, but Ranma once more battered the ball-like body parts into several of his other attackers, including the newest vice-admiral on the scene, the one he had been dueling with a moment ago. He had barely risen up into the air to join the fight around Ranma before he had to defend himself from several of the Berry Berry user’s body parts. The man seemed to only be able to use Busoshoku on one. “Dude, I admit that perseverance is important but come on!”

“As much as I hate to agree with a pirate on anything, he’s right Very Good! Your particular Devil Fruit power is useless against this foe at your current level! Retreat!” the new man ordered, his tone much calmer than Dalmatian or Onigumo’s as he held the man’s head in his offhand, having caught it while blocking the other ball-body bits with the flat of his sword. “Take command of my ship and pull back, move to the other ships and aid their crews in getting back into the fight.”

“Er, y, yes sir,” the man muttered, thoroughly embarrassed.

Alas, even as the guy began to pull his body back together, his embarrassment was just beginning.

“Very Good? Really!? His name is Very Good!” Ranma flipped himself up and over at one of the other attackers, resting an arm around the guy’s shoulder then. “And I thought I had an ego. His parents must have been quite proud for some reason. I mean, what the hell were they going through to name a child that!?”

“How dare you!?” he shouted.

Another marine lashed out with a series of sword strikes from a rapier, which Ranma dodged with ease. “You don’t talk about someone’s parents like that!”

“Oh, come off it! Being named Very Good is practically begging for a ‘your mama’ joke!”

With a roar of rage at their friend’s roasting at Ranma’s hands, the Marines charged once more.

As they did, the one called Onigumo began to sprout arms like that of a spider, each of them holding a saber. The other two sword-using vice-admirals used katanas, but this one used sabers, and Ranma quickly learned why as he attacked with a series of quick, far more economical slashes and stabs, shouting out, “Penetrating strike!” While the slashes were made without the aid of Busoshoku, when he stabbed those swords forward, they were covered with the black of Busoshoku, Onigumo seeming able to turn it on and off extremely quickly.

At the same time, Dalmatian charged, racing towards Luffy faster than most of his other enemies had ever moved. Luffy was still fast enough to keep up with him, taking his admittedly extremely powerful blows or redirecting them, returning a blow that smashed into Dalmatian’s face.

But Dalmatian was now covered with Busoshoku, and Onigumo took advantage of Luffy’s distraction, his swords gleaming black themselves as they cut and thrust at Luffy. Luffy’s hands thrust out, meeting those swords with hands gleaming black themselves, then he kicked out hard, lashing out with a Rankyaku, knocking the vice-admiral off-balance even as he blocked the blow with a saber.

The next second, Luffy was up and above Onigumo, flipping himself up and over to land a blow on the next vice admiral to come towards them, a dropkick that crashed into Strawberry’s head. He grunted but had already called on his own Busoshoku and the blow did little.

As he circled, Momonga smirked at Luffy, his single katana also gleaming with Busoshoku as he saluted Luffy. “It is a brave commander who takes on the enemy on his own for his people’s sake. It doesn’t mean you’ll win this, but at least you’ll go down with some dignity, pirate.”

“Enough! We’re here to kill him, not talk,” Onigumo growled.

“Not sounding very justicey there, metalhead,” Luffy quipped, then dodged a blow from the furious vice-admiral, redirecting the blow upwards and then moving into the man’s reach, his elbow hammering up and into the other man’s side right below the shoulder.

As he grimaced in some annoyance from the blow, Onigumo started. *I didn’t sense that!*

His mastery of Kenbunshoku wasn’t as good as his Busoshoku, but he should have sensed a blow like that even so. But it swiftly proved utterly useless against someone moving as fast as Ranma could and as chaotic as the battlefield around Ranma was. A case in point occurred a second later as Onigumo sensed Luffy’s next few blows, only to be caught unawares by a ki blast to the face right after he blocked a palm strike.

The impact from the ki blast sent him flying backward. “GRAH!!”

One of the other officers attacked Luffy from behind, getting in the way of a strike from Strawberry, who cursed, pulling his blade back. As cavalier as they could be with a normal marine’s life, officers were somewhat more important.

But Luffy moved with the blows, deadening much of their force without using Tekkai or Busoshoku before grabbing the man’s wrist, kicking out hard at the same time to Momonga, who was coming in from the side. Momonga blocked the blow with his sword, but he couldn’t deaden its momentum, and Luffy’s captive was then tossed into the path of a commodore who was coming at Luffy from above. A second later, Luffy lashed out with two more bolts of energy, forcing both Momonga and Onigumo back once more. Neither of them had seen the ki blasts before, and Onigumo’s face was still sore and burning from the one that had hit him.

But Dalmatian charged at him from above, crashing into Luffy and grabbing him in a bear hug as he continued to use Geppo, although in reverse. Instead of bouncing up into the air, he pushed both of them down to crash down into the ocean. “Dalmatian Deep Dive!”

“As cool as the name is, no, thank you!” Luffy grunted, kicking out himself and redirecting them, his legs just as strong as the other man’s, while he tried to free his arms from the man, which was hard thanks to the bearhug pinning his arms against his side. *That ship, it’s the one that’s still stuck in the entrance to the cove, the one whose captain Laki sniped. And it looks like it and the other ship were at the edge of my Haoshoku’s range.*

Both of the ships, which had previously been standing like corks in the bottle, had turned and had come after the Resolve now. One was busy slaughtering the other pirate ships, none of whom had been out of Luffy’s Haoshoku. The other ship was trying to close with the nimble Resolve while its fellows, under Very Good’s command, had begun to fire on the Resolve once more.

At the same time, Luffy changed the course of their fall he thrust his head forward and back, hammering his Busoshoku-protected forehead into the other man's head like a woodpecker. "Let's... see... how... durable... you... are... you... BASTARD!"

Even through his own Busoshoku, Dalmatian felt that, and his eyes began to cross as he faltered.

With a final wrench of his arms, Luffy was able to throw off the man just as they crashed into the deck of the battleship that Luffy had been aiming for. The impact was such that Luffy and the man smashed through the vessel's main deck, then the topmost deck and into the upper gun deck. But that didn't stop Luffy. He pulled out still more nails from his pocket and thrust out his hand in either direction. "Finger bomb Shotgun barrage!"

Dalmatian gasped as several dozen of the nail slammed into him with far more force than even a normal finger bomb, grunting even through his Busoshoku. "How the hell are you doing that?!"

At the same time, his Busoshoku was able to take that punishment. The ship and its crew were not.

The decks above and to the side of where he and Luffy had crashed down through the ship collapsed, as did the side of the vessel. Worse, Luffy hadn't been able to aim each of the railgun rounds away from the various marines, although he had tried. Men struck by them were torn asunder or had their limbs amputated as they screamed. Others found themselves falling into the decks below among the flotsam, and many would further die from the impact or impalement by the debris.

The railgun rounds that Luffy sent into the ship's side continued on their way, crashing into the other marine ship finishing off the pirates, costing it a few guns.

Instantly water started to flow into the ship's lower decks, and Luffy could feel the ship starting to sink. He quickly pushed himself out of the rubble, then flipping himself over an attack by Dalmatian, using his head to springboard further upwards. Landing on the topmast, staring at the circling captains and admirals. "What, not going to see to your fellow crewmen? That's cold, guys."

"Our men know the reality! As long as we can take you in, justice will have been served, no matter the cost," Onigumo snarled, causing no reaction from Strawberry but a slight grimace from Dalmatian and Momonga.

"Right..." Luffy drawled the word, grimly cracking his neck and longing, more than he had ever longed for anything to unleash lightning on these fuckers.

But he couldn't, not yet. Enies Lobby was within barely a few hours distance travel by train, and through the gates there, Marineford. If he showed that he was a Logia, full admirals would be sent after him within a day. It would take them time to get here, but they wouldn't stop coming after Luffy and his crew, not if he showed both a Logia power which could boast of being one of the strongest and the Haoshoku on top of that.

And that's a fight the rest of my crew are not up to, not yet, possibly never for a few of them. One admiral, maybe, but someone with a true, unbeatable mastery of Busoshoku and Kenbunshoku like Gramps? Or Kuzan and a few vice admirals even? No. I couldn't fight them all.

No, the only way Luffy could win and not cause further trouble for the crew was with the skills he had besides the Goro Goro. *Heh, although that doesn't mean I'm without tricks. And these idiots seem primed to make the same mistake as so many have before.*

The vice admirals should probably have pulled back all of their fellows to deal with the carnage below from Ranma's Haoshoku instead of just one captain. Of the marine ships, the four who had kept back from the cove were now too busy trying to sail themselves, allowing the Resolve to twist around, trying to get free from their fire. Only one of the Marine ships had been outside of Ranma's Haoshoku, which had ironically been the second ship set to block the entrance to the Pirate's Cove. Now having finished the last of the other pirate vessels, it moved to attack the Resolve hoping to use its broadsides to sink the enemy ship as it fired its long-range guns at it too.

As Ranma glanced down, he saw the enemy ship smash the Resolve's aftmost mast while putting a hole right through the aft of the ship, destroying two of Nami's mikan trees. Although it had yet to range on the more nimble ship with its normal cannons, thankfully. Resolve kept her material body hopping, making certain not to let the enemy ship get close enough to turn aside and use its broadside.

Seeing this, Ranma twisted, dropping down towards the ground via Soru, ducking below his attackers so fast only the vice-admirals could keep up with him. They all quickly launched their own long-range attacks, but instead of dodging, Ranma once more pulled out his Busoshoku. Trusting in his Busoshoku to protect him for a moment, Ranma used still more finger bombs, more normal ones this time since he was worried about his enemies above him seeing the telltale spark of lightning.

This worked up until Onigumo thrust for his side. Taking it on the side, Ranma grunted as his Busoshoku was overcome, leaving a tiny stab wound in his side. Although the cut instantly began to heal, much to the shock of Onigumo. "Curse it! That should have penetrated!"

"I don't want to hear about you wanting to penetrate me, you asshole!" Ranma taunted before freezing in mock horror and letting his hands fall to his rear protectively. "Or, no, wait, I shouldn't have mentioned asses, should I? Wouldn't want to give you ideas."

Onigumo snarled in fury and he and charged forward. Within a minute, Onigumo and the other two sword users had forced Ranma to back away from the battered ship below, leaving it to continue to try and range on the Resolve without its main batteries.

Yet another of the marine ships was already turning. Recovered enough from the Haoshoku blast to become a threat once more, it now shifted to put itself directly into the Resolve's path. But busy as Ranma was with the officers, only Laki was able to help the ship and its spirit.

Even as the Resolve shifted this way and that to avoid more incoming cannon fire, Laki took action, bouncing through the air once before racing forward right over the waves using her Air Dial skates. "You better still be with us when I get back, Resolve!"

However, her advance was seen by one of the marines above them. Shu, Onigumo's flag captain, bounced away and down, unwilling to let this enemy pirate, who had heretofore been doing amazing work on defending the enemy ship, attack his own. "Rankyaku!"

Seeing the air attacks coming her way, Laki lifted up her personal Iron Cloud dial to guard herself, dodging as wildly as she could without turning away from her quest to charge the enemy ship, using the Iron Cloud dial to block what she couldn't dodge, noticing that the dial itself seemed to be almost thrumming, quivering in her hand from the overuse. *Crap, I hope it doesn't break on me, just not yet! Put up with the pressure of being down here for just a little bit more, please!*

A flick of a switch and Laki's rifle shifted to a faster rate of fire as Laki began to pump out shot after shot up towards the incoming Marine. These shots lacked the penetrating power as her single shots, but the rate was good enough to hopefully force the officer away from her.

But it didn't work. Shu simply ignored them, batting them aside with his hands as he dropped towards her. Despite all Laki could do, he closed with Laki, the rifle not doing enough damage to force him to use Tekkai. But then, Laki grabbed up at her side, howling out, "Burn Blade! As she pulled out what looked like a dagger's hilt at his side.

This was the same Burn Blade type dial weapon she had given to Kamakiri, although much smaller and not as long-ranged. It was just as hot, though. Yet Shu wasn't a fool, and when he saw that weapon coming towards him, he dodged as wildly as he could. This let him get in under her range, but then Laki dropped the Burn Blade and let him grab her, pulling Laki in, right up until her hand, clad in a leather glove, touched his chest.

Knowing something was coming, Shu shouted out, "Tekkai!" but he was not prepared for what was about to hit him.

“Impact.” There was a click, then the very air around Laki’s hand and his side seemed to **flex** with energy, and Shu cried out in agony as the hit shattered ribs, knocking him unconscious with the impact. His swift use of Tekkai not up to that blow.

Shu flew backward, bouncing a few times off the waves before slowly sinking into the water. Laki was then forced to dodge about as a few of the marines started to fire at her. Her Iron Cloud dial came back out, Laki unable to retrieve the Burn Blade before it sank into the ocean. But she then pushed forward, closing quickly.

As she closed, marine shooters started to fire down at her. She didn’t bother replying, simply dodging madly with the help of Laki’s dial skates until she was right alongside it and then, once more, used her now throbbing arm, touching the side of the ship.

The Impact Dial exploded once more, creating a massive hole in the ship several times larger than a cannonball could have created right at the waterline. And in the manner of all such things, it instantly began to fill with water. The ship started to sink, slowly but surely, and Laki retreated quickly to the Resolve arriving just in time to stop its main mast from being destroyed by a final shot from the sinking vessel. However, two more cannonballs went into its side, causing Resolve to grimace in pain even as she congratulated Laki on that move.

Laughing, Ranma launched himself forward into Onigumo, kicking him hard, seeing him use Tekkai, and then lashing out with a series of small ki blasts, before he was once more into the center of the cordon of marine officers. There, he once more began spiral taunting them all. “One more ship down, morons. You’re gonna have to try harder than that!”

“Spread out!” Onigumo barked. “Take him from every side, try to stay above him. We need to negate his midair advantage! Strawberry, keep...”

“Oh, and your name’s Strawberry?!” Ranma actually leaned over in midair and howled with laughter before rolling forward under a slash from the main in question, the man’s sword gleaming with Busoshoku. Ranma paused in midair, using Geppo, and shoulder-charged back into the man with a Soru assisted speed. Strawberry took it with Busoshoku halting Ranma in place, but Ranma turned instantly and hammered several dozen blows to his rib cage as he shouted out, “Come on, Strawberry, why so blue, I thought eating strawberries were supposed to be good for you?”

Then he was away, lashing out with a kick that caught one officer in the knee before he could use Tekkai. His knee snapping under the blow, the man howled in agony, leaning forward to grab at his knee in a completely untrained instinctual motion, which did not help matters sending him tumbling through the air. A blow to the side of his head laid out that Marine, and he started to fall towards the ocean below. But he was swiftly caught by one of his fellows, who then began to retreat with his companion.

Meanwhile, Luffy was now bouncing through the air using Geppo and his enemies' attacks. Like most of the opponents he had faced before, even those with Geppo tended not to be as at home in the air as Luffy was, thanks to his training. And the Marines were paying for it. That, and it was a very target-rich environment, Luffy could hardly miss any ki attack or Rankyaku he launched, whereas the marines had to be careful of their fellows. His taunting was also having an impact.

“So close!” He dodged again.

“Oh, here we go again! You always lead with your left. How have you survived this long?” Luffy quipped even as he slipped around a blow punching out with his own.

“Shut up and die, pirate!” came from several throats, joined by others shouting out, “Straw Hat, you will die for justice!”

“Hah! It’s not so easy to hit an actual pirate rather than your friend there, is it?” Luffy taunted as Strawberry’s blow clipped one of the other officers, sending him flying into another.

A second later, Luffy’s hands then clapped down on one of the other fighters from either side of his head with enough force to jar his brain, causing him to fall unconscious. Luffy then lashed out with a soft Rankyaku kicking that captain into several of his fellows so hard that they were sent flying despite their using Geppo and Tekkai combined before zipping into and through the created tumult, smashing his first victim with an overhand blow that sent him down to the ocean below.

And if Luffy had used a bit of electricity arcing between his two hands to further fry that guy’s brain, well, it wasn’t as if he was going to have an autopsy. His comatose form traveled so fast that none of the other marines could grab it before it disappeared into the water below. This caused howls of fury and anger from the marines, who redoubled their attack, pressing in even while Ranma continued to outmaneuver and taunt them.

“Stay calm!” Onigumo shouted, growling the words through his own fury, frowning as he registered something in Ranma’s movements. He wasn’t moving randomly. Instead, he was moving in a set pattern. “Stay calm, dammit all! He’s riling us up on purpose, forcing us to make a mistake!” *Why in the world is he moving in a spiral? Wait... wasn’t there an odd report from Smoker about...*

But too late.

“Hiryuu Shouten Ha!” Ranma shouted as his punch flew up into the center of the mass of Marine officers.

Instantly, a tornado formed around them, tearing and hurling the marines every which way. Meanwhile, Ranma canceled his Geppo technique for a moment, dropping like a stone.

The tornado grew downwards too, but not as quickly as from side to side, and this allowed Ranma to deal with the last few bombard cannons before Strawberry, Momonga, and Dalmatian were on him. Although he had been the first to have a hint of Ranma's plan, Onigumo had been closer to the center of the tornado, while the other three had been staying at the edge of the fight, waiting for a chance to close.

As he turned away from the last marine ship, a blow struck Ranma in the shoulder, but he moved with it, reaching up and grabbing at Strawberry's sword, holding it still and shattering it in a blow that caused Strawberry to speak up for the first time, squawking in outrage. "That was a meito blade!"

"Now it's named pieces," Ranma jeered, lashing out with a kick. But the still stunned Strawberry blocked it, and Momonga slashed at Ranma's outstretched leg, almost catching it before Ranma could pull it back. But Ranma's ki attack took that man in the face, blinding him if not really hurting him before he dodged under a blow from Dalmatian.

There Ranma stayed for a few seconds before Dalmatian, Momonga, and Strawberry all backed away suddenly, racing in every direction to grab at their fellows as they too were hurled out of the tornado. That allowed Ranma to retreat for a bit, heading back to his ship, while elsewhere the other marine vessels seemed to be getting themselves under control thanks to Very Good's efforts.

But Luffy's attack on the fleet had a specific goal, and even though their attempt to break out wasn't going to work thanks to the Haoshoku failing to be a complete knockout, Luffy's attacks on all the marine ships had a specific reason in mind. All of the attacking ship's main guns were now inoperable, and the instant his feet touched down, he began to bark a strangely bizarre order. "Retreat back into the cove, Resolve!"

"What! We can't just..."

"We have to," Luffy interrupted Laki. "Their bombardment guns are gone, and there are so many burning ships in the way, they won't be able to get more than one ship into the harbor at a time if that! But we might not be able to escape all three ships out here after they start waking up from my Haoshoku attack. I can't use it again too often without tiring myself out, and against four vice-admirals, that's a bad idea. Here, I can put myself in the air above the cove's entrance, which means I'll be able to attack the officers and any ship they send in."

He then flashed her a wry, almost sardonic grin. "Besides, where would we go? We'd have to escape out into the open ocean, with our ship badly mauled and only you and I aboard. We could try and circle the island, wait for Robin and her group but that'd still leave us with Sanji and the others and no way to get to them. No, best we fight it out here, beach the ship or at least move it inland to get away from the marines for a bit and let me play with their officers without worrying about you and Resolve."

“And what about the Water 7 militia?” Laki demanded tartly, even as Resolve start to turn the ship about.

Luffy shrugged, glaring towards the entrance to the cove. “I did say ‘too often’ when talking about my Haoshoku.”

This worked to a T. The locals had moved up still more cannons and had prepared to fire on the Resolve as it moved towards the docks and a waterway leading deeper into the island. But to a man, they collapsed under the pressure of Luffy’s Haoshoku, while Laki barely kept conscious herself where she was checking the Iron Cloud dials, using her concern on the number, which had developed cracks, as a way to try and ignore the impact of the terrifying technique.

Unfortunately, the marines, while arrogant, were not stupid. Their fleet had been mauled by this point and for little gain. And they certainly weren’t going to feed their ships into Haoshoku range again. Instead, two of the more battered captains, those with the least skill in Tekkai, were sent back to command two of the remaining three vessels. With their still barely acceptable crews, they put them into shore, launching boats and moving overland into Water 7 towards Pirate’s cove. Meanwhile, the vice-admirals led the rest of the officers back into attacking Ranma and the last ship waited out of range before heading into the Pirate’s Cove after the pirates.

Well, the survivors kept attacking him, anyway. By this point, along with Shu, two other officers had been slain in fighting Ranma, and seven more had been knocked entirely out of the fight, some crippled and some simply battered into uselessness. There were only two captains, two commodores, and the vice-admirals left in the fight. Still, Onigumo believed that would be more than enough.

OOOOOO

“We’re nearly there.”

Rubbing her eyes, Nami came awake, staring at Frankie, then out the window. “How long would this train ride have taken by ship?”

Frankie paused thinking, then shrugged. “Four days? The seetrain doesn’t care about the weather and goes around forty knots, which is faster than most ships can go.” Most ships could make between six to ten knots per hour and the trip had taken three hours.

Nami whistled at that, shaking her head. “That’s amazing. And Old Tom designed it?”

“That’s right,” Franky answered, his voice an odd mix of pride, regret and guilt. Lots of guilt.

Nami heard it in his voice but decided not to comment on it. If Franky wanted to open up more than he already had about his secret past, although Nami was amused at how quickly Robin and Luffy had gotten it out of him, he would. For now, she looked around for Makino and Sanji, seeing Sanji coming back from a walk through the train from one direction and Makino coming from the other direction where the little girl's room resided.

"Are you all ready to go, ladies?" Sanji asked as he held out a hand to help her to her feet. She took it graciously, thanking him, knowing those little moments were like catnip to him.

"What did everyone think about the warning that Luffy sent all over?" she inquired as she was lifted to her feet.

"Hmm, well, don't look now," Sanji whispering his reply. "But there is a man over there in a rather garish hat who just looked into this cart."

Nami didn't even blink, but her eyes did take in the scene, as she smiled at him as if Sanji had just made a joke. "I see him. What's up?"

"He's done that every few hours. And when I walked by him sitting down earlier, he was sitting down with two extremely strange fellows. Now, I am not normally one to judge someone by their cover, but I am feeling very paranoid given what happened with Mayor Iceburg. Thus I am wondering if we are being followed." *And that bastard in the hat keeps on looking at Nami-chwan every time I see him!* Sanji thought, keeping his anger in check with difficulty.

Franky snorted. "For now, don't worry about it. Unless they want to jump us out in the open, they'll just follow us until we're back on Water 7. Heh, I'd love them to try to follow us to where the auction is occurring."

"Why is that?"

"Because, while the island Arcade is neutral, the auction is being held by someone and she is connected to Charlotte Linlin."

"The female Yonko?! The strongest woman in the world?" Nami gasped. Even in East Blue, Nami had heard of all the Yonko and how they operated, and before she had met Luffy, Linlin had been her favorite to hear about.

"Got it in one."

"Why would someone like that want to sell off Adam wood?" Makino's eyes narrowed in concern. "Surely they've got ships of their own they would love to build with it."

Franky shook his head. "From what I understand, Charlotte doesn't really think in those terms, and it's not the Empress herself or her forces that is selling off, but someone related to

them who can use their name as protection. I'd wager someone needs to pass on a lot of money all at once and that's what this is for."

"With that in mind, I'm a little concerned about the auction aspect," Nami murmured as they exited the train, completely understanding why someone would have to be a particular kind of moron to try anything in an auction connected to one of the emperors. "You sure we've got enough money on hand to win this?"

Franky chuckled, tapping his nose, causing a metallic clang. "We do. I'm in good with the guy running the auction house. I've already slipped him a few designs, and I got a few more that I'll use as a portion of the payment. Will probably have to shelve over three-hundred million, but we should be able to buy as much wood as we need to rebuild your frigate."

The city itself was relatively normal. It looked like any other autumn island, and Makino and Nami were both thankful that they brought along long-sleeved shirts at Franky's suggestion. Mozu and Kiwi were dressed even warmer, long coats that they had pulled out of bags covering them.

They were met at the doorway to the auction by a large, somewhat rotund fellow, who had a goatee and sunglasses on to go with his somewhat decent suit. His tan was slightly unusual, the majority of the people they'd passed had pale skin, and whoever told him that green was his colors had done the man a severe disservice, Makino reflected, biting her lip to not comment. Regardless, the man looked at the very definition of smarmy.

But he greeted Franky like a long-lost friend, clasping his arm despite his own forearms being nowhere near as large as Franky's. "My friend, you're here to bid, yes? I knew the Adam wood would, heh, pull you out of Water 7. Do I have to ask if you also have the necessary entrance fee?"

"I do indeed, my old friend. I wouldn't be super me without it, would I?" Franky laughed, and Makino watching all of this with eyes like a hawk, realized the sound was both too loud and too carefree to really be Franky's real laugh. Nami noticed too, and the two women looked over at Kiwi and Mozu, who, despite having proven last night to have no talent for the game, had extremely good poker faces.

Soon, Franky and the man had entered a small room to one side of the auction house's foyer, which proved to be the man's office. There, Franky pulled out a series of designs for what looked like different types of rivercraft, a kind of tower system, and what looked like a steam-powered ocean-going ship with an extremely odd-looking bottom. He handed them all over to the man, tapping each one, in turn, whispering into the man's ear, explaining what they were and how much each design should cost.

The man's eyes gleamed, and he nodded firmly. "I'll add four to whatever hundred million amount you shout. Wait until it gets big enough before starting to bid. These, these are

magnificent Franky, and I am glad that the Franky family and mine will continue to thrive together.”

“You scratch my back, and I scratch yours.” Franky grinned, pulling up his sunglasses to give the man a wink. “That’s how a super friendship works.”

As they exited the man’s room and began to make their way to the auditorium where the auction would occur, Nami was startled as someone shouted out her name. “You there, the one with the orange hair, would you be Cat burglar Nami, of the Straw Hats? That’s big news!”

Nami whirled around, staring in shock at having been recognized. But the man who was coming towards them didn’t look to be any kind of threat. He was dressed like the auctioneer was in a very good suit, although he was black with a white shirt underneath it. He had a hat on his head, even inside for some reason, a tie and a cane he was leaning on.

He was also a giant stork. He stood nearly as tall as Franky and almost as wide, but most of that seemed to be feathers and leg. And his eyes were, while still those of a stork, immensely intelligent.

“Er... I, I um...” Nami found herself stammering. She was still not used to being recognized at all, let alone as one of the Straw Hats. And despite everything she had seen since entering the Grand Line, a walking, talking stork was a bit much.

“Forgive me, my dear. I don’t have any nefarious notions for approaching you.” The man bowed grandly. “My name is Big News Morgan and I run the World Economy News Paper.”

Nami’s eyes instantly narrowed, remembered anger burning through her wariness at being recognized. She marched up to the man, grumbling angrily, “Are you going to tell me why the hell you raised prices recently! I paid as much for my last newspaper as I did for my subscription last year!”

“There is a reason behind that, and it is one of the reasons, my dear, I was intrigued to see you here. Add in the auction being run by my good friend Hassan. Along with your companions.”

Much to Franky’s well-hidden relief, the man didn’t recognize him and then looked over at Makino, confusion also plain on his face there. When he looked at Sanji, there was a flash of something like recognition in his eyes, perhaps which Nami filed away, as she didn’t think it had anything to do with recognizing him from the horrible picture of his bounty poster.

Setting that aside, Nami smirked, cocking her knee coquettishly. “One of the reasons? I’m afraid if you’re going to ask for an interview, I’m going to ask for a good bit of money before I say a single thing.”

Morgan laughed. "Of course, of course. If I was going to ask for exclusive rights to an interview now or into the future, I would be more than willing to pay. No, I only have two questions, one about your background and one about something you might know about here in Paradise. First, and this is completely off the record, you were recently near Joya, correct?"

Seeing no reason not to share that information, Nami nodded.

"Do you know, well obviously you don't know what happened there, but do you know what pirate or whoever it was took it into their heads to shoot down my birds? I lost a dozen of my birds in that area for some reason." Despite trying to sound upbeat, the large stork looked very angry, flexing his pinion feathers like they were fingers, and he wanted to choke someone.

Nami frowned, looking over at Makino and Sanji. Sanji took a drag on his cigarette, staring at the bird man thoughtfully. "It wasn't us, and I can't think offhand why someone would want to do that."

Makino, on the other hand, was stroking her chin thoughtfully, "I think I do. You remember that ambush that the Blackbeard Pirates tried to set up? They used a lot of other pirates to cover their movements and pin us in place."

"I remember that, but what's your point?" Sanji inquired.

"Do you think those pirates would've been willing to take us on if they saw our captain's real bounty?" Makino snorted scornfully. "They were dreamless trash the lot of them, not a spine to be found anywhere on their crews."

"I see..." Morgan muttered. "That makes some sense. But you mentioned this might have been done by Blackbeard's crew?"

"Blackbeard was the one who attacked us. If you want more information, you'd have to ask him. But I think my friend's right. They are the only ones with a possible motive," Nami answered. She very certainly did not use Makino's name. Nor Franky's. If they were not being recognized now, she certainly wasn't going to help that in the future.

"I just might in the future," Big News Morgan laughed, clapping his wings together. "For now, there's little I could do about Blackbeard anyway. I'd hoped it was a pirate crew I could remonstrate with personally, but given Blackbeard's status, that would prove foolish."

Makino's narrowed, but at that point, the door to the auditorium opened, and before she could ask a question, they were all ushered into the room. As they went, Morgan whispered to Nami. "My other questions have to do with background information, my dear. Is it true that the majority came from the East Blue? The weakest ocean? And that you have mostly preyed upon other pirates? Bar your ransacking of the Alabasta capital, of course."

Even as he asked that, Morgan hid a smile. *And wasn't it a remarkably nonlethal ransack, once I had one of my reporters look into it. I wonder what really happened there. Seeing them in person now, I think there is definitely a cover-up of some kind. What could the Alabastans be hiding? And from whom?*

"Oh, those are both true," Nami answered with a nod. "Most of the time, trouble finds us, not the other way around. I blame it on our captain being a trouble magnet."

"Fantastic! That is big news. Or it will be eventually," Morgan muttering the last words so low even Nami couldn't hear. He then bowed over Nami's hand, pecking it once with his long beak as if he was kissing it, causing Sanji to growl and his eyes to flare up into little pillars of fire. "Goodbye, for now, my dear. That is all I wish to know. It is just enough to get a little bit of a background to your crew the next time you make big news. And I think, with a name like Monkey D. Luffy, you can take that trouble magnet concept as a given."

"Unfortunately, I pretty much can almost guarantee it," Nami sighed before her face formed. "But don't make the mistake of thinking that that will make me give out free interviews in the future. Flattery will get you nowhere with me."

Big News Morgan laughed and moved over to where an auction house guide gestured him into a seat. Sanji and Franky also moved forward as directed, although Sanji was stopped and pointed toward a sign to one side of the door. The sign read, 'no smoking allowed.' Sanji stared, sighed, then moved to put out his cigarette as Nami and Makino joined Franky's two girls behind Franky and the auction began.

OOOOOOO

Following the group of pirates discreetly, Blueno quickly proved to be no one's fool. The moment he saw the flag plastered discreetly on the auction house's front door, he grabbed the other two and pulled them to a halt, ducking into a nearby alleyway.

"Yoyoi, why are we not in there watching them, Blueno, yoyoi?" Kumadori asked.

"Please tell me you noticed that pirate flag?" Blueno exclaimed to Kumadori's words.

Nero pushed his head just around the side of the alleyway to see, and he went white. ducking further into the alleyway, he shivered. "Right. No chance of us messing with anything in that building right now."

Kumadori cocked his head, and Blueno reflected that the guy really wasn't all that bright and usually let Jabra do all the big thinking for him. "That is the mark of Charlotte Linlin and means whatever is going on in there has the approval of the Yonko or whoever is in there has a connection to her."

“That means we should take them by force that, yoyoi!” Kumadori answered, theatrically shifting his body and thrusting one hand forward. “If the Straw Hats already have a connection with a Yonko, it would be best to strike them down now in the name of justice!”

“Are you an idiot? Blueno growled, now thoroughly fed up. “Just the three of us? The Yonko are named that way because they always respond to transgressions against their flags and how powerful they are. I’m not going to take anything connected with the most insane of the lot on. If you want to get yourself killed, be my guest. But leave me out of it.”

Kumadori frowned at his words but then sighed. “I suppose that justice should know when to bide its time, Yoyoi. And it isn’t as if the Yonko herself is in there, yoyoi.”

“God, I hope not,” Nero muttered, shaking his head. “The very idea is nearly enough to give me a heart attack.”

“Truly,” Blueno muttered, shaking his head, reflecting that the youngster at least had a good head on his shoulders, even if he wasn’t a true CP9 member.

“You mentioned something about wanting to attack him on the way back? I suggest we get started with that idea,” Nero opined.

Snorting, Blueno nodded. “I’ll get in touch with the nearest World Government base. You two head back to the train station and take over the ticket office. We’ll need to finagle things there, make certain that we can bring enough power to bear and not let civilians get in the way.”

OOOOOOO

Since the Adam wood wasn’t the only thing on auction that day, the auction that Hassan ran took several hours. But, eventually, thanks to the dials and Franky’s in with the local auctioneer, the crew could walk away with several tons of Adam wood. Franky even organized the delivery of it to Water 7. A special ship would take it straight there early the next morning.

Or at least would start out for Water 7 the next morning.

“What’s to stop the auctioneer from, shall we say, losing that ship?” Sanji questioned Franky as the six of them made their way back to the train station.

“The fact he’s connected to the Empress,” Franky answered. “Part of what makes all of the Emperor’s respected as well as feared is that if they or anyone connected to give you their word, they keep it.”

“More than that, we bought out insurance,” Nami laughed. If they lose the ship, they had to return all of the money and the plans and then give us at least again what we paid for it. It would be very bad business for them to try that.”

“You’re amazing, Nami-chan, Makino-chwan!” Sanji announced, dancing around the two ladies.

But Makino had shifted her attention to the ticket box man, as Franky paid for their tickets back to Water 7. The man looked a little bemused or perhaps concerned. Whatever it was, Makino decided she didn’t like it. “Excuse me, Sir, is there something wrong with the train?”

“No, ma’am, there’s nothing wrong, or at least, not really. It’s just, we had a lot of government types who suddenly came in and, well, it was kind of weird how they all came in as one large clump. And the tickets too, they bought out all the seats on several of the carts.”

“Well, maybe there’s some kind of convention going on, or a local government nearby went on vacation. Even the most bureaucratic government acknowledges the need for days off after all,” Makino chuckled, even as the others stiffened.

“Governments type officials,” Franky murmured as he moved away from the ticket booth and towards the waiting train, looking over at the others. “What do you think that’s about?” the sarcasm in his voice was almost sharp enough to cut with.

Makino frowned, shaking her head as worry began to bubble up in her. “I tried to connect back to the Resolve when the auction ended as Nami was going over the contract. I didn’t get a reply. I thought maybe we were just because we were out of range, but...”

“There’s no such thing,” Franky shrugged. “Den Den Mushi can always piggyback onto the world’s signal. And especially if they are paired, they’ll be able to reach anywhere. That’s what makes them so valuable.”

“So, the rest of the crew are probably fighting for their lives somehow.” Sanji took another drag on his cigarette. He hadn’t been allowed to smoke in the auction hall, and this was his third since leaving the hall, barely five minutes later. “So, the question is, what do we do about it?”

Nami frowned. “Could we just take another train? Or hitch a ride on the ship that will be taking the Adam Wood? Why bother fighting if we don’t have to?”

“Two problems with that. One, this is the only train that goes between this island and Water 7. And Arcade doesn’t do any business outside the searain with Water 7, the train’s just too quick and too easy to compete with, waina,” Kiwi stated.

“And two, the ship is just supposed to be neutral. If we get to Water 7 without issue, fine. But if we knowingly bring trouble to the ship, not only will the crew not fight with us, but they’ll also probably turn us over to whoever attacks. Especially if it’s World Government types, waina,” Mozu added.

“And three, it wouldn’t be super to act as if we’re scared of these pukes!” Franky laughed, smacking his fists together. “They might have a lot of mooks, but there’s no way they can be prepared for this Suuuuper Franky!”

“You know, it would have been nice to actually avoid a fight for once.” Nami scowled. “We could just wait here too.”

“They’d just order the seatrain to wait as well, I imagine,” Makino sighed. “Or put pressure on the local government to add still more troops. Arcade might be neutral, but that only carries so far if it’s the WG asking, and they are asking for help against semi-unknowns like us with no real power base.”

“Besides, Franky has a point, ladies,” Sanji bowed towards the two of them. “Even if the worst has come to pass and Hina-swan was forced to report on our abilities, she didn’t see everything we could all do. I don’t think they are going to be as prepared for us as they think, especially if they can’t surprise us.”

While Nami and Makino were still somewhat reluctant, that made them feel a bit more confident and Nami actually began to smile. “Well, my Dial Staff could use some live guinea pigs, I suppose.”

With Franky in the lead, Makino and Nami in the center with the twins, and Sanji at the back, the three pirates and three gangsters moved into the train, then made their way forward’s to where their chairs were. A booth that was, Nami and Makino was amused to note, in a no smoking carriage. As they went, they didn’t pass very many people dressed like the ticket seller had warned them about, which Makino commented on.

Depressed that he wouldn’t be able to smoke the trip away, Sanji pouted, while Mozu and Kiwi pointed forward as one. “They have to further forward, waina.” “It’s dollars to donuts they would want to keep together, waina.”

“The girls are right. Although I noticed that hat guy from before was behind us,” Nami murmured. “Fodder ahead of us, really tough opponents behind, do you think? And I’ll note that no one else has sat in this carriage yet.”

“True, but don’t think you can smoke in here just because we’re alone, Sanji. I rather like not having to smell your tobacco so often,” Makino warned.

“You wound me, Makino-chan,” Sanji pouted. Soon enough, the train’s engine let loose a loud whistle, signaling that it would be leaving the station soon. A few seconds later, after handing their ticket over to one of the train’s workers, Sanji stood up, making his way back the way they had come. “I’m going to go get a smoke.”

Nami and Makino looked at him in some surprise, and Nami shook her head. “Is this really the time?”

“It is a perfect time, mademoiselle, never fear. I will be back.”

Makino’s eyes narrowed and she smiled faintly. “You mean to spring the trap only on yourself?”

This caused Sanji to smile at her and nod his head in agreement before moving off quickly, heading to the aft end of the cart.

Outside, he stood there for a moment watching as the seatrain continued to pick up speed, then pulled out a cigarette, lighting it up and taking a deep drag, as the door to the next aftmost carriage opened. Sanji nodded to the man who came out, blowing a smoke ring, as he took in the man’s appearance before turning to look at the passing sea. A nice suit and black hair swept up into two horns and a gaze that could be best described as almost aggressively unresponsive.

As Sanji finished his cigarette, he pulled out another one, tossing the butt out into the ocean before he lit up his next one. Then without turning back to the man, he spoke softly, his voice barely carrying over the noise of the train. “So, how are we going to do this? The easy way or the hard way?”

Not even questioning how the pirate had divined his intent, the user of the Door Door fruit hopped up into the air to one side of the train, bouncing along beside it as he opened a door to one side. When it appeared, several hundred government officials near the front of the train, who had readied their rifles and pistols to shoot into the other side of the door, fired. The musket balls flashed in from one side of the train to the other, filling the area between the carriages where Sanji stood with lead.

Instead of dodging, Sanji simply stood there, growling out “Tekkai.”

This was precisely what Blueno wanted.

The next second that door closed, and he opened one directly underneath Sanji, trying to pull him in. Sanji used Geppo to get away, then another door opened, through which Blueno, having hopped into the Door Dimension, threw a punch. The blow was hard as one of Luffy’s during training and nearly sent Sanji to crash headfirst into the ocean beside the seatrain

before he grabbed the safety railing and flipped himself back aboard, landing on the top of one of the carriages, looking around warily. "Now, that's just not fair."

Having followed him up onto the roof, Blueno broke his silence to quip, "You're a pirate, and you're complaining to me about what's fair?"

Sanji nodded, then thrust out a kick through the open door that Blueno had just created, connecting to one Blueno had opened to one side of his body, catching his fist and pushing it back, causing the other man to wince in pain. In return, Blueno's attempt to close the door before Sanji pulled his foot back failed. *Thank god he's not able to close those things any faster! Although, what would happen to the body part thus caught? Gah, best not to think about it.* "You have a point. I suppose we'll just have to see which one of us is better at cheating then."

"Rankyaku Barrage!" Blueno answered, opening up a series of doors around his body and sending Rankyaku attacks through them from every angle. Sanji bounced and dodged. This let him avoid being hit, obviously, but Blueno was able to push him down the length of the train despite Sanji's best efforts. Which meant that he was in no position to stop Nero and Kumadori from attacking in turn.

Kumadori leaped out from between the caboose and the carriage connected to it, looking up at the fight between Blueno and Sanji. Seeing that Blueno seemed to have it well in hand, he turned in the opposite direction, bouncing along the train, gaining speed. Meanwhile, Nero simply strolled forward, ignoring the confused and startled look from the sheep all around them as more than one man or woman peered out of the windows to try and see what was making the noise.

Franky and the others had spread out in their carriage, or rather, Makino and Nami had spread out throughout the carriage, grateful for the fact that whoever was behind this attack had not put civilians in danger for it. Both of them, along with Mozu and Kiwi, had also pulled out their weapons. The twins sat with their swords out and over their laps to either side of Franky as they had been sitting throughout this trip. Makino leaned against the forward wall of the carriage, and Nami sat in the middle, idly twirling a segment of her staff.

Entering the carriage from behind, Nero paused, staring at them as the eyes of all five turned to him. He smirked then, taking his hat off and bowing from the waist. "Well, if you all know what's happening, I don't suppose I could get you to come along quietly? Letting anything happen to such lovely ladies would truly pain me."

Nami rolled her eyes, then quickly twitched her staff up to block a punch that would've taken her in the side of the neck. The end of the staff barely gave at all from the strike and she winked at the flamboyant man. "Thanks for the impact!"

She then twisted in her chair, kicking up off of the floor and lashing out with the other end of her staff from her thigh. As she thrust, the end of it flared out, thrusting out towards the other man like a spear.

Surprised both at the staff's odd abilities and Nami's speed, Nero barely dodged backward, his eyes widening. And Then Franky hammered a blow into his side, hurling him the length of the cart to crash into and through the doorway there.

"It was super nice of you to make certain there weren't any civilians here since that means I can let loose with all my suuuper power!" Franky declared, rearing up and slamming one fist into another, pulling off the thin flesh-like covering that hid his steel fist.

Even as Nero struggled to his feet, the doorway he'd been smashed through was filled with eleven men with muskets. This blocked Makino's attempt to shoot him, though one of the men fell backward with a cry as her musket ball impacted his knee. Then the men were firing, and the twins quickly flipped themselves up and over, putting the booth they had been sitting at between the incoming fire and themselves. Makino didn't, simply shouting out "Tekkai" as she stood still. Nor did Nami, oddly.

Having been under orders that only Franky needed to be taken alive, the government officials fired on the women without any hesitation, while a few charged in or to either side, freeing up more space for their fellows, showing there were a lot more than eleven men attacking them now. But their bullets did nothing to the standing green-haired woman, and when their bullets hit Nami, where she faded from sight, dissipating like illusion or mirage.

"Mirage Trap!" Nami's voice came from the other side of the train before she slid down, ducking under a booth as the officials continued to fire. Meanwhile, above them, the cold air she had been creating ever since Sanji left finally came together in a large flowing cloud bank as it was joined by several dozen heat-dial created balls of air.

Now, as the men continued to fire or pull out swords and charge forward, the ceiling of clouds became a thunderstorm. Rain started to pelt down out of nowhere, leaving the attackers just as confused about that as they were about Franky ignoring the stray musket balls, which hit him as if they were so many mosquito bites. Then lightning began to crash down, electrocuting the attackers, especially those who had shifted to swords.

Chuckling, Makino pulled out her pistols before shifting into Tekkai once more as more bullets flashed towards her. This was fortuitous because a millisecond later, a staff thrust through the wall next to her, punching into her neck with bone-crushing force.

The green-haired woman's Tekkai faltered, and she was hurled to one side with a cry of pain, but she rolled with it, coming to a stop behind Franky as Mozu and Kiwi helped her to her feet. Shaking her head and touching her neck gingerly, Makino looked back to her former position, her eyes narrowing. "What in the heck..."

Following the staff, several dozen fists made out of hair punched their way through the side of the carriage, pulling out a large segment of the wall. This revealed Kumadori, who began to dance in place. "Yoyoi, I am Kumadori, and in the name of justice, I will end your life this day, Yoyoi!"

Staring at the kabuki-wannabe, Makino could only hang her head and honestly longed for the day when she fought normal-seeming people. "Why do I always get the crazies?" *There has to be something in the water in the Grand Line, honestly.*

"You want to switch off?" Franky asked solicitously as he blocked several bullets from Nero with his forearm shield, which had enlarged to look like a real shield. Nero seemed to be an excellent shot and was now leery of coming close to Franky again.

"Yes, please!" Makino requested, pulling out her own pistols and firing past Franky, with very little room to spare before rolling to the other side of the carriage, firing as she came to a stop. He would've said something about that if not for the fact that each of her bullets had nearly hit Nero.

The CP9 agent desperately used Kami-E to dodge the first shot, which would have hit him in the upper chest, right over his heart. The next, if he had been so foolish as to stop dodging, would have taken him in the head, and despite his using Kami-E, the third still nicked Nero's shoulder. Makino had fired one gun so fast she was able to drop the pistol and grab up another from her ki space, unloading it in turn before using the pistol in her other hand.

The flamboyant man stumbled back, breathing deeply. While his mastery of Kami-E was top notch, the pirate woman's shots had still managed to graze him with that third shot. *This would be a great time to know Tekkai, but fine, let's see how good she is at dodging!* With that, Nero pulled out his second pair of guns, grinning maliciously at Makino, firing back as he hopped up and over the government agents, flipping himself out the hole Kumadori had created while he and Franky crashed together in the center of the carriage. "Let's see how good you are then, pirate!"

Makino shot his musket balls out of the air, then pulled out two guns that Laki had made for her recently. They weren't very long-ranged even for pistols, but they had several more shots per gun than the normal pistols she had been using up to this point.

"I rather think I am better than you, Mister Silly Hat," she quipped, charging forward, bouncing towards the other man via Soru, who shook his head in shock at seeing that and did the same towards her.

Meanwhile, Nami had created a blanket out of Iron Cloud. "Dial shield." This covered her body save for one arm, which she used to twirl her staff, sending up still more miniature cold fronts. Meanwhile, Mozu and Kiwi had clashed with the government officials. They weren't

very good. Nami judged she could take them both on even without her staff's special powers. But they were keeping a group of the agents away from her.

Then her other hand pulled out from her pouch, wearing the gauntlet Laki had created for her. "Flame dial!"

As she had anticipated, the flame hit the cool front Nami had created within the confines of the carriage. Smog billowed out, blinding most of the people in the cart and letting her dash forward into the center mass of several of the government assassins, with Mozu and Kiwi next to her.

The end of her staff flicked out, both ends, and there were screams of pain and cries of agony. The Impact dial flattened every person it touched, while the other end of her staff sliced through people. That made using her staff a lot bloodier than she had realized, and Nami was thankful that she was moving so quickly that she didn't actually see any of her handiwork through the fog.

Having just dashed into the carriage to take on Makino in hand to hand, that fog had blinded Nero and Kumadori nearly completely, although Kumadori, oddly, had other senses to rely upon that allowed him to still know where Franky was at any given time. He and Franky had been exchanging blows, Franky's fists versus Kumadori's staff and his use of his hair. The hair was actually quite versatile, able to pierce, bludgeon and shift into hands or shields as needed. The two times Franky's fists had gotten through had been more than enough for Kumadori to know he couldn't take those kinds of hits. They had even threatened to break his Tekkai.

Franky's fist disappeared into a hair wall, then he was forced to dodge a spear made of hair. Pulling Kumadori off balance with the hair the man had enveloped his arm in, Franky lashed out with a Strong Right, which caught Kumadori right in the stomach, hurling the man out the hole he had previously created. His Tekkai held for the most part, but Kumadori could feel his muscles weakening under the pounding.

"Strong Hammer!" Franky continued the attack, sending out several dozen musket balls from the multiple barrels in his knuckles as his other arm reeled his metal hand back in.

Yet musket balls were no threat to Kumadori, who simply dodged or blocked as needed, while he continued to bounce along the train.

Meanwhile, Nero had charged close enough to get into hand-to-hand range with Makino before he was blinded. The green-haired woman lost one of her guns to a lucky blow from him, then he was close enough to see her as the fog dissipated out the hole in the side of the carriage, lashing out with hand, fist, knee and elbow.

To his surprise, the peaceful-seeming woman blocked or deflected his blows with her one remaining pistol until it shattered. So focused was he on following through with a blow to

her face, Nero missed her other hand, until it grabbed onto his arm, holding him still. Desperately activating Kami-E, he was able to dodge the next punch, and Makino was so surprised that she couldn't dodge his kick, which sent her flying backward with a groan of pain.

"Finally!" Nero instantly followed up, using Soru to close once more. But to his shock, Makino got to her feet. His first punch was redirected over her head, and then Makino's other hand launched forward like a pile driver. And this time, Nero was too slow to try to dodge.

Makino's fist glowed black for a second before it crashed into the top of Nero's blocking forearm. The strike shattered his arm and then continued to crack ribs and maybe something inside his body as blood exploded out of his mouth. The impact hurled Nero backward through the heretofore intact forwardmost wall of the carriage and through the cart to crash through its other end. This revealed several dozen more government officials in the farther carriage, all of whom twisted around from pointing their reloaded guns at something else to fire on them. Makino had barely a second to activate Tekkai and still stumbled back thanks to the sheer weight of fire hitting her, grimacing as her Tekkai slowly started to fail in places just enough to leave bruises.

"Dammit!" with that, Makino was rolling to one side, putting several bodies from the previous group of government officials between her and the shooters as Nami, Kiwi and Mozu took cover where they could.

Makino then grabbed up their guns, loaded them quickly, and began to fire, single shots at this point taking out single enemies on the other side. Meanwhile, to her shock, Nero stumbled to his feet. He looked like death warmed over, his eyes bloodshot and blood dribbling from his mouth, and he wasn't moving right. But he still turned, shouting out or rather shrieking out, his legs flashing. "Rankyaku!"

That attack flew over the heads of the government officials to crash into Franky, who shouted in pain as he was flung sideways, allowing Kumadori to gain the upper hand. He was on Franky in an instant, lashing out with staff and hair. Franky's outstretched arm, which he had been using to fire at Kumadori, was grabbed by his hair, and his prayer staff caught Franky in the side, thumping against the metal there. Then a large portion of Kumadori's hair flared up into needles as he shouted out, "Shishi Shigan!"

Before Kumadori could finish the attack, Franky breathed in, hurling a fireball at him. "Fresh Fire!"

The earlier cold front that Nami's staff had created had dissipated by this point, and the fireball smashed into the man, causing him to reel back in pain. Tekkai was no protection against getting burned like that, and besides which, the man was unable to call upon Tekkai at present using his hair and staff as he was on the offensive.

“AHHH!” Kumadori reeled backward, then was met by Mozu and Kiwi. Having doubled back down the carriage from the shooters, they had left Nami and Makino to deal with them and Nero. Now they came up and over one of the booths, their swords flashing out. Not at Kumadori’s body, but his hair, slicing chunks of it off as he rolled around to put out the fire on his clothing.

“When you fight Franky, you fight us as well. Besides, that look is so last century, waina!”

“Agreed, you’ll look better with a mohawk, waina!”

“Keep him busy for a second, girls!” Franky ordered, firing his machine guns towards the government officials, wondering idly why, with all the noise, no one was coming to see what was going on. His shots took several government officials out, allowing Makino to pop back up and give Nami cover fire as she raced forward.

Nero, on the other hand, had collapsed onto his side. Whatever Makino’s punch had broken inside him had finally caught up with him and he was done for the count.

As busy as Kumadori was trying to deal with the fire, the actor had no time to protect his hair, and after a few passes of their swords, his hair was chopped near to half its previous length. But once the fire was out, Kumadori quickly recovered. Using Kami-E to dodge their attacks. He lashed out with a punch that knocked one of the girls unconscious while his staff smacked aside the other one’s sword.

Before he could do anything more, Franky was there, thrusting himself forward in a body check, which took the other man to the ground before he could turn to face Franky and was thus unable to use Kami=E.

He slammed him there, and then, his legs changed. First, they became almost like those of a centaur, then they clamped down onto Kumadori’s arms.

“Let go, let go, yoyoi! Shigan Hair Cascade!” The man’s hair still stabbed up at Franky. But as shortened as it was, the hair couldn’t get up to his face or eyes, and against the real steel of Franky’s chest, the man’s hair abilities couldn’t break through.

“Heh, no more dodging for you! Now, let’s see if that Iron Body technique of yours can withstand a steel punch from this super Franky!”

“Tekkai Go!” Kumadori bellowed, right before the first punch took him in the chest. The next blow took Kumadori in the face and was followed by several more, breaking Kumadori’s Tekkai despite having taken it to the highest level he could. Two more blows and the man looked to be unconscious, but warily Franky hammered two more punches into him, then stood

up, grabbed him, and dragged him back to the hole that he had made a moment ago, tossing him out and into the ocean.

He looked around then at faces of the government agents who had turned away from fighting Makino and Nami to stare in shock at another of the vaunted CP9 being defeated. Franky then jerked a large thumb to point out the hole. "No ticket." The government officials just kept staring as Mozu joined the attack on them. *Suuuuperrrr! I've always wanted to say that!*

Nami, on the other hand, left off hammering them, turning and moving to one of the openings between carriages, where she flipped herself up and onto the roof.

Outside, Blueno had come up against a problem. Sanji's Tekkai and limited Busoshoku were simply better than Blueno's attacks. He just couldn't do enough damage to the cook, and every time he tried to close to use the Door Door fruit on Sanji's own body, Sanji leaped up into the air, using a combination of Kami-E and Geppo to avoid him. *Damn it, he really is just as strong as Fukurou warned us he was!*

Blueno's attacks had pushed Sanji onto the defensive but that wasn't enough to end the fight. Twice he had nearly used his Door Door powers on Sanji to change his limbs or body into revolving doors, making the limbs useless. But Sanji had replied by pulsing Busoshoku through his limbs, somehow overriding the Devil Fruit's influence on his body. Since then, Sanji hadn't wasted Busoshoku on his attacks, only using it to defend himself, negating that ability.

And he was very worried, judging by the noises near the front of the train, that the others were fairsing no better despite the fifty government agents they had been able to bring in on this.

For his part, Sanji was content to dodge Blueno's attacks and keep up with the still-moving sea train as he analyzed his opponent's style. There was a certain tempo to a fight or to an enemy's style.

Ranma had explained at one point that, "Once you have a grasp of an enemy's style, you know how he thinks, how he moves, where does your opponent usually aim his blows, does he like to hit-and-run, grapple? Once you have figured out the heart of his style, figuring out everything else comes easily."

Although he was, technically, getting the crap kicked out of him, by the time the sounds of violence from elsewhere on the train started to peter out, Sanji had figured out a Blueno's style. It was a mixture of hit and run and heavy assault. Blueno used his door powers to move around and stop his enemy's movements or attack directly.

This didn't work on Sanji since he could dodge the guy's touch most of the time, and it had to be a real touch. The guy didn't seem to be able to do it with a light brush, thankfully.

Then he would move in and hammer them as much as possible. *If he just makes one mistake when he uses his Door Door powers again, I can take him out with one shot.*

Suddenly, the noise from farther up the train started to fall ebb out. Wondering how his fellows had gotten on, Blueno quickly pulled back, turning and racing back the way they came leaping from one carriage to another, a plan forming in his mind.

Sanji came after him, gaining quickly. Then when Sanji was just about to launch into a kick, Blueno turned, dodging under the kick and creating a door right under his other foot. Sanji's leg fell in, dragging him down. "Shit!"

With Sanji thus caught, Blueno instantly pressed his advantage. He didn't aim at Sanji's body, but the leg that was sticking out at an odd angle thanks to his awkward landing. "Shigan!"

Blueno's finger tore into Sanji's leg just above his knee, his normal durability unable to stop the blow. Then as Sanji grunted in pain, A point-blank Rankyaku followed up.

Sanji's Tekkai took it, but with his one leg now bleeding and somewhat unresponsive, Blueno locked the one arm that had been under Sanji's body in another door. Now with half his body trapped like that, Sanji couldn't move enough to release himself. "Double shit!"

Smirking, Blueno pulled back his one hand, his other hand needing to remain stationary, keeping the doors locked as it were. But then he twisted around, ending the technique as his hand flashed up to block Nami's staff as it flew towards his head. A return blow was, astonishingly, blocked by the woman's staff. "Damn. I suppose your presence means my team members lost."

instead of answering, Nami brought her staff around once more, aiming for Blueno's chest. "Impact staff!"

"Tekkai," Blueno bellowed, his body stiffening.

This proved to be a mistake. The blow from the staff released a lot of pent-up power, hurling Blueno off his feet and crashing into the roof of the carriage several carriages back of where he had been standing.

Racked with pain, Blueno was slow to push himself to his feet, and by the time he did, Sanji had done the same and was standing between him and Nami, having pulled his leg out of the door Blueno had used to finally trap him. "Many thanks, Nami-chwan, but please let me finish this."

Blueno growled angrily, then flashed forward with Soru, moved, before dodging to one side and then back down, disappearing into a door. He then appeared next to Nami to the left side.

But Sanji had noticed two things before this. Blueno always attacked what he saw as a weakness and he preferred to attack from the left.

So when he appeared, his hand flashing out in a Shigan towards Nami's face. Sanji had already launched himself backward into a kick. The kick hammered into Blueno's side, sending him hurling out of his open door and through the air. "You will never touch a hair on Nami's head, you Shitty Bull!"

Tumbling across the carriages' rooftops, Blueno raised himself with some difficulty but couldn't open up a door fast enough. Using Soru himself, Sanji was on him, shooting out kicks so fast that Blueno, dazed from the precious two hits, could do nothing but take them with Tekkai, while he gathered his senses.

He's breaking through my Tekkai, move! Move! Blueno practically shrieked to his body, unable to concede that his body had taken too much damage from that last blow to really respond. Then Sanji disappeared from in front of him, and for a moment, Blueno's eyes widened. Then he jerked to the side just in time to take a Geppo-enhanced flying kick to the face.

"Mutton Shot!" The blow smashed into Blueno's face, hurling his now-unconscious form off the train to splash into the water to one side.

Landing next to Nami, Sanji bowed, pulled out a cigarette, lit it and took a long drag blowing smoke ring before winking at Nami. "A stinking slice of venison should know when not to mess with the cook, don't you think, Nami-chwan?"

"Ew," Nami shook her head. "Little too cannibalistic there, Sanji-kun."

Chuckling, Sanji led the way forward. The two of them soon dropped down at the same position between carriages where he had started the fight against Blueno. Inside they found the battered and unconscious forms of several dozen government officials currently being tied up by Franky, Mozu and the now awake Kiwi, as well as the form of Nero being seen to by Makino.

"Ladies," Sanji said, bowing grandly. "I take it that you all had a good time of it?"

Makino shrugged her shoulders, wincing. While she hadn't taken any great damage, she was still covered with bruises from when her Tekkai had started to fail. "You might say that. Though, using the divide and conquer strategy did work, Sanji. Well done!"

"That, and their two primary fighters didn't seem to work very well together," Nami laughed, patting her dials staff affectionately. "The rest of them sure as heck weren't prepared for all my little tricks."

Makino smiled up at Franky and patting him on the shoulder. "And I don't think they had any idea about this big guy's abilities either."

"Oh yeah! There's a reason why I rule the underworld of Water Seven! It's because I'm super!" Franky shouted, twisting his body and thrusting out his arms to one side, as the twins left off what they were doing to pose to either side of him.

"Let's just hope the rest of the crew is doing as well," Nami said more seriously.

OOOOOOO

For her part, Robin was not doing as well.

Having thought she had escaped Fukuro, Robin tried to hide herself in among two caravels that looked like they were supposed to be a pair, using her power to create eyes all around her. Particularly back the way she had come so that she could see Fukuro and use her powers at range to fight him.

This was why she saw Jabra coming, hopping down from above and attacking her quickly. She ducked under a blow from Jabra, and a second later, a fist appeared from the ship to one side, catching Jabra in the jaw, but Jabra took it easily, launching out his own attack.

This time Robin murmured, "Tekkai," and took the blow before hopping back into one of the drydocks beneath the caravel. When Jabra moved to attack again, a web similar to the one that Fukuro had run into appeared, slowing him down. By the time he broke out of it, Robin was gone and he cursed. "Damn it. You think you can escape Robin!? You might be a master at running away, but we are the CP9! Your time in the sun was over the moment we got permission to come after you!"

I, I know that name... Robin thought to herself, she could also see Fukuro closing in on the noise, and her thoughts broke off for a second, only to come back to the name CP9. Old memories were welling up in her once more at that name: about Ohara, about the library within the tree, about the fear, the flame, the fire and Saul. Old memories, old, powerful fears. *And, and I hear thunder in the distance.*

A second later, Jabra found her, smashing the door to the small smithy she had been hiding in that lay to one side of the drydocks. As Jabra launched himself forward, he wasn't prepared for the anvil to be hurled into his face, and he stumbled back, battering it aside before trying to move forward again, only to have hands appear all over his body. Before they could do anything, he simply smiled. "Tekkai. You really think you have a chance against me?"

Robin didn't reply, pushing herself to her feet from where she had dodged bits of the door. Her mind was still consumed by old fears coming back once again to haunt her, as it had

with the sight of Aokiji, she spoke up now, glaring at the government agent. "I hear thunder in the distance. What have you people done!?"

"Heh, you know very well what we've done. I'm sure you still have nightmares about it, don't you, Devil Child, although, hahaha, maybe you should be thankful? After all, how many people can say they were the cause of two Buster Calls! You'll go down in pirate history! Did you really think you could escape us forever? CP9 never forgets a target, and nothing can stand against the World Government!"

Robin gasped, staring at the man in shock. "You, you monster! Do you know, do you have any idea what a Buster Call can do to an island like this!? It isn't a simple gun you can aim at a single enemy! Buildings, people, history! A Buster Call will wipe it all out!" She exclaimed, her age-old fear of the Buster Call and what it had done once again rising uncontrollably with her.

"Exactly!" Jabra guffawed. "Do you take me for a fool, Devil Child? I'm a wolf, not an idiot. I was never going to try to fight your captain on an even footing, not even with the full power of CP9 behind me."

At those words, Jabra's attempt to break Robin's spirit failed. Staring at the man, Robin's mind now began to recall what she had seen Ranma do. The Haoshoku he had used twice in her presence. His mastery of Busoshoku. His odd abilities, his adaptability. And then she thought about their secret ace in the hole. She knew Luffy, so she knew he would try to limit his use of logia powers. Even so, the ships of the Buster Call were scant threat against him. And Luffy had proven to be able to fight a vice-admiral, or even a logia-user, before.

Thinking of all that, of Luffy's near promise to her, wiped the fear of a Buster Call out of Robin's mind and she began to smile. "Perhaps then," she quipped, "you should probably have brought a little more to the party. I rather think my captain would simply see a Buster Call as a challenge."

Jabra was still staring as she suddenly shouted, "Gran Fleur Punch!"

The fist came towards him, but the smithy shattered, and Fukurou blasted through like a cannonball, blasting into the side of the fist, which came apart a millisecond before he would have hit it. That would have caused Robin some pain since she experienced a portion of the sensation her limbs felt. This way, the hands dissipating created so many petals that it blocked Fukurou's view for a moment. When he could see past them once more, Robin was gone, leaping through a small window on the other side of the smithy.

Even as he breathed a faint sigh of relief at having not been hit by that massive fist, Jabra scowled, looking after her. "She's trying to get us away from the swordsman and that Chopper character. I'm going to go check on the fight with the Pirate Hunter. Hopefully, Kaku and Rob were enough for him."

“Chapapa, you mean you hope you don’t have to fight him too, Chapapa,” Fukurou retorted.

“Shut up! Just keep after her. We can’t let Nico Robin escape. While the plans that Rob and his team were sent for aren’t our priority, having Robin around is damned important,” Jabra grumbled, staring at where Robin had been. *Dammit, I’m the one with the tricks. I’m not supposed to be tricked instead!*

With a growl, Jabra turned away, leaving the search for Robin to Fukurou.

OOOOOOO

Scowling, Kalifa watched as Chopper went to work and soon enough, it was obvious that his help would keep Iceburg alive. With that in mind, she waited until Chopper announced that he was finished working on the man, who had long since fallen unconscious. “All that Iceburg needs now is time and rest. Oh, and he can’t eat solid food for a while or anything with a lot of iron in it.”

“Good.” With that and with no prior warning, Kalifa kicked the unsuspecting Chopper hard in the side. The hit flung him sideways, smashing his little body through the wall to roll into one of the many rooms of the palace mansion. Being in his normal body, Chopper only had a small portion of his Zoan durability, and he gagged as he rolled along the ground, the blow having driven the breath out of his lungs.

And it hurt a **lot!** Most of the time when he trained with Ranma, it was in his Heavy Point. Now a part of Chopper’s brain made a note to start training in this body while he slowly pushed himself to his feet, glaring through the hole he’d made at Kalifa, trying to get his breath back. *Or maybe heal a rib. Ow, can’t tell which.*

Kalifa turned aside, lashing out Paulie, who had just opened his mouth to say, “Now hold on,” before he was struck similarly, smashed through a doorway at the end of the hallway. Both of them were alive, and Kalifa made a note allowed to come back and finish them off later. *Best I make a clean sweep later, I suppose.*

She then leaned down and poked a hard finger, not a Shigan but just a normal finger into Iceburg’s side right above his wound. The anesthesia meant that it didn’t hurt, and she flicked his nose several times. “Wake up. Wake up.”

Iceburg groaned but looked at her in some confusion.

“There’s something I need to know, Iceburg. Something you need to tell me. Where are the plans for Pluton?”

Even in his current state, those words caused Iceburg's eyes to widen as he stared at her. "I, I don't know what you're..."

Kalifa reached forward, grabbing Iceburg's wrist. He tried to get away from her, but he was horribly weakened from his wounds, and his normal strength was in stark abeyance now. "Did you know that reading your pulse can tell someone if you're lying, Iceburg? Now, I ask again, where is the plan for Pluton?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Iceburg practically hissed. "Who, who even are you, really, Kalifa?!"

"A lie. Now," Kalifa held up her other hand and then slowly lowered it to Iceburg's wound. "I will ask again. Where are the plans? We know you gave them to Franky. Where would he hide them?"

Face white, Iceburg was forced to reply. "H, how should I know!"

"That actually rings true," Kalifa murmured. "But Franky does have them. Your pulse just told me that. That is enough. I can say with certainty, Iceburg, that working with you was never a pleasure and always annoying. Goodbye."

With that, she raised her other hand, one finger pointing out like a stiletto as she pulled back her hand.

"No!"

Chopper knew he wouldn't be able to get to Kalifa in time to stop what he knew would be a killing blow. So instead, he tossed a piece of the rock from the rubble of the wall he'd been smashed through towards her.

Kalifa turned, smacking it out of the way, but she had underestimated how strong Paulie was. And how much rope Paulie hid under his clothing. From down the hall, Paulie lashed out with his rope, grabbing at her arm. "I don't know what the hell you're doing, but I won't let you hurt Iceburg!"

This was the scene Lulu had come into, looking pale and shocked already from what he had seen in the fight outside between Rob, Kaku and Zoro. Yet as he saw Kalifa standing over the horribly wounded Iceburg and Paulie trying to hold her back, he didn't hesitate. Instead, he dashed forward, pulling out a sword he had strapped to his back.

Lazily Kalifa batted aside the rope, catching the end of it and pulling Paulie through the air, kicking out as he sailed towards her, then ducking under a blow from Lulu. She then moved, and something seemed to bubble up around her arms as she practically hugged Lulu from behind. "Bubble Bubble, Golden hour!" Her hands moving all over a wildly blushing Lulu's body.

But that blush quickly faded as her touch and the touch of the bubbles around her body began to change him. He became smooth, almost caricature-like as if he was being changed into a glass figurine. His weapon dropped from his hand, and Lulu gasped, “Wh, what...”

“Behold my new power, the Bubble Bubble Fruit. Mah, it makes your skin look quite pretty, Lulu. In a way, it’s a pity. It isn’t as if I need the help to make my skin seem pretty.”

“Gah, wh, what in the...” Then a blow from Kalifa laid the now toy-like Lulu out before she raised the same hand to batter aside a bit of rubble tossed her way.

Kalifa then used her new Bubble powers to try and transform Chopper as she had Lulu. “Bubble Wave!”

But Chopper was too quick and grabbed at a nearby door, hurling it in her face. She smashed aside with a single kick, snorting as she strode towards the Zoan user.

“If you just left Nico Robin and run when we sprang the ambush, you could have gotten away. We only want your captain dead and Nico Robin in chains. Surely the rest of you could make your way wherever you wish.” With that, she slashed out with an attack, “Bubble Bubble Stream!”

“Wherever we wish is to be together!” Chopper shouted, grabbing a chunk of the wall and using it as cover. “We all have dreams, we all have hopes for the future, that can only be achieved together!”

“Dreams? Foolishness,” Kalifa muttered. “Power is all that matters! Power and obedience to authority. Even if you survived today, if Nico Robin gets away, you will have made an enemy of the World Government.” She snorted. “Not that it will matter. There’s no chance of your crew surviving a Buster Call, after all.”

“I don’t know,” Chopper grinned as everything he’d seen his captain do, went through his mind, including the hurricane attack he had used against the marines near Alabasta. “I think my captain got a pretty good chance at screwing over your entire day, lady!”

“And if he does,” Kalifa shrugged. “So what? You’ll still be dead.”

Having closed with the Zoan, she now lashed out with a kick, disdaining her powers for the moment. The door shattered, and Chopper was forced to block her next kick with his forearm, which nearly cracked under the blow, hurling Chopper sideways through a wall.

This being an outer wall, Chopper found himself crashing back into the open air beyond and then slamming back-first into one of the water fountains, sending water everywhere as Kalifa stepped forward. “Bubble Bubble Stream!”

The attack caught Chopper's other half, but he twisted, rolling around on the ground, and when he came up, his head was back to normal. He looked at it in shock, then along at the water all around them, then back to a now furious Kalifa. "Water..." Chopper whispered. "It, it's like soap. The water washes it away!"

Kalifa scowled, then shrugged. "Oh well, if I can't use my new Devil fruit powers on you, then I'll just have to beat you up the old-fashioned way.

She charged forwards, and Chopper backpedaled quickly, slamming one hand into the fountain, tearing off a chunk of it and hurling it at her, which Kalifa knocked aside almost contemptuously, but then Chopper was charging forward and she was off balance.

Kalifa barely used Tekkai to protect herself, before Chopper's punch crashed into her chest, and it still sent her through the air, before she got both of her feet under her once more. Chopper then stood there in the center of the rapidly spreading water, his hands outstretched in a boxer's stance as he glared at her.

Snarling, Kalifa came in, bouncing forward's, using first Soru to close the distance, then Kami-E to dodge around Chopper's return strikes, before lashing out with a series of kicks. Chopper took them, grim and determined, his durability such that he could do so, then tried to grab at her leg, but she bounced away, flipping up over him, lashing out with another kick.

That one landed against the back of Chopper's head, and he started to see double for a second before he shook his head. He then dodged forward, rolling, as, despite her earlier words, Kalifa tried to use her new Devil Fruit powers on him again. Half of his head and most of his neck turned into a soap figure. But as he rolled into the water, once more, it dissipated.

Then Chopper twisted, his big hands dipping into the water as he splashed her with it.

Growling angrily, Kalifa wiped at her hair and then watched in some amusement as Chopper ate a small yellow object. "Is mid-battle really the time to eat a gobstopper?"

"Rumble ball!" Chopper announced in reply. "Speed Point!" With that, he bounced forward, moving almost as fast as Kalifa could, but his attacks did little to her, and she was able to block them easily. But then he was forced to retreat as bubble once more covered her in a kind of armor.

He changed into his Arm Point, but another soap attack flashed out in a wave of bubbles toward him. Speed point got him out of most of the stream, but one of his back legs was still caught, forcing Chopper to roll around in the shallow water to dissipate the ultra-smoothness it created. The water worked once more, but Kalifa raced forwards, her arm cocked back.

As he finished wiping off the soap, her hand flashed forwards. A desperate attempt to shift into his Guard Point didn't protect him this time, the finger lashing out unerringly towards his face. "Shigan!"

Chopper cried out in agony as Kalifa's finger tore out his left eye, causing him to flop backward as he dropped his guard point. He rolled this way and that in agony, holding a hand to his face over his ruined eye.

Kalifa laughed maliciously, raising one foot to finish him. "Mah, that pain-filled gaze is a good look for you. But, while this was fun, I alas have other people to kill today."

Before she could do so, Chopper shifted back into his Speed Point and kicked out, catching her leg lightly, just enough to throw off her stomp as he scrambled to one side, before changing into his Heavy Point, hurling himself back into her, grabbing at Kalifa with one arm and hammering a blow into her face.

Despite having used Tekkai to protect herself, Kalifa was somewhat dazed and fell back on training rather than using her new Devil Fruit powers, kicking him hard several times in the chest with her knees, allowing Kalifa to wrench herself out of his grip. "When will you learn you can't beat me!?"

Her next blow smashed him through a wall, and Chopper cried out in pain but rolled with it, glaring back at her. "I'm never going to give up! I won't go down, not when the rest of my friends are still fighting out there!"

As he glared at her, Chopper saw the water from the fountain seeping into the new room quickly, and Chopper's eyes widened as he noticed something in the wall, a series of wires and a plug. Unlike most of the islands they had been to, Water 7 was advanced enough to use electricity in its various homes, and the wall had a few electrical runs going through it.

When Kalifa attacked, Chopper dodged, changing into his small form and rolling forward before turning in the breach he had previously created, launching out a series of punches as Kalifa closed. She blocked them with ease, returning a Shigan to his chest, but he shifted into guard point, blocking it entirely.

Then, he was rolling back out of the wall he had previously smashed and pushed a portion of the debris from the wall down into the water. That portion held the end of the electrical outlet and the broken remains of the wires leading into it. *Please work!*

Kalifa screamed as the electrical currents passed through the water up into her body. It wasn't a lot, but she hadn't prepared for it, and Tekkai would have only made it worse if she had tried. Then, before she could even try to recover, Chopper lashed out with all of his strength. "Heavy Gong!"

The blow shattered her ribs, and now it was Kalifa's turn to shatter walls with her back as she sailed out through the opposing wall. This led out of the right side of the mansion and open-air, where Kalifa, still having not thrown off the electrical shock, fell through down into one of the many waterways.

There, the water caused her to scream briefly before she sank almost instantly. Chopper stared down after her, gulping and shaking his head. Killing was not something Chopper had gotten used to. But then he straightened his back and raced back to the three Galley-La company workers.

OOOOOOO

At the same time, Chopper had been trying desperately to save Iceburg's life, Zoro could perhaps be thought to be enjoying himself. After all, like his captain, Zoro was something of a combat junkie, and from the start, he got all the combat he could handle from Rob Lucci and his other attackers.

The very second after Zoro had nearly cut his head off with a surprise attack, Rob launched himself forward, so fast that most would have been unable to keep up with him. But while he didn't use Soru very often, Zoro had trained against Luffy and knew how to deal with speed. He was already turning and slashing at the air to one side of his position. The leopard man dodged it in turn, and his Rankyaku, this time launched from his tail instead of his legs, flashed towards Zoro. "Rankyaku Hobi!"

This attack leveled a house just outside the mansion's grounds. But Zoro had dodged it cleanly, and his next strike from Sandai Kitetsu lashed out, heading for the man's throat, the blade covered in Busoshoku. Using Kami-E, Rob dodged, a sneer on his face. "You can't hit me like that," he taunted, only for a slight cut to appear on his forearm from a strike he thought he had dodged.

"You sure about that?" Zoro snarked before ducking to the side as Kaku rejoined the fight, lashing out with a sword in either hand. Zoro blocked him with Yubashiri and Sendai Kitetsu and then lashed out with his third blade in his mouth, forcing Kaku back, but Rob closed in faster than the Santoryu user had anticipated. His next blow struck the pirate in the chest, although not before he could use Tekkai.

This forced Zoro to stay still for a second, taking another hit from behind from Kaku before he could move again, and Zoro grimaced, feeling the attack on his back would no doubt have left a bruise. *If only I could bring out Busoshoku across my body for longer. I wouldn't have to fucking pick and choose, particularly between offense and defense.*

Zoro ducked under an attack, lashing out with Yubashiri, then a twitch of his head sent a slash towards Kaku from Wado Ichimonji. Both that and the previous attack were met with the clang of steel on steel, despite Kaku having used the side of one of his long legs to block the

cursed blade. A quick flip caused the two of them to disengage, and a slash sent his way kept Lucci away for a second, as Zoro got some more distance between them, scowling at Kaku. "You've got some kind of armor on your legs?"

"Incorrect. With the training we have been given, our legs become lethal weapons, as dangerous as our hands. I simply took that one step further." Kaku lifted up a foot, showing that he had strapped a sword to the outer side of his leg. "Thus, I, the only swordsman among us, have become a Yontoryu user." His voice then shifted from his cool, professional tone, becoming somewhat disdainful. "Honestly, I think it makes much more sense than Santoryu."

"We'll see," Zoro growled, and a second later, the two of them clashed in the center of the pavilion while a Rankyaku from Wado Ichimonji crashed into Rob Lucci, pushing him off-balance and halting his own charge forward. Then Kaku was forced to dodge a series of thrusts that tore through the wall behind him, only to be caught by a Rankyaku of his own, right before Zoro turned on a recovered Rob.

Resorting to Kami-E once more to defend himself from a series of attacks to respond with his own, Rob quickly realized that Zoro was too fast for that technique, his blows coming faster and faster as he pushed Rob, but Rob quickly regained control of himself, dodging around the blows, lashing out with another blow that should've taken Zoro in the back of the head only to see it dodged. *I need more speed to keep up with him.* The thought was somewhat galling, but Rob was a professional and didn't let his annoyance of needing to use one of his trump cards so soon.

Disengaging, Rob leaped to the top of the wall for a second, watching as Kaku flashed back in to engage Zoro. The four-sword style user was barely able to keep up with the Pirate Hunter's speed. *But he'll have time to shift to his new, powerful Zoan form in a moment once I shift to my secondary form.*

Breathing in deeply, Rob concentrated for a moment, whispering out, "Life/Existence Return: Paper Drawing Martial Body." As he finished speaking, Rob's body began to shrink and compress, turning his massive, muscled leopard form into a slightly more humanlike appearance, and Zoro blinked as Rob streaked back into the attack, moving far faster than before.

Zoro barely got his sword around in time to block the blow, grunting from the impact as he stumbled back. That impact wasn't as hard as it had been, but Rob's speed was far, far greater. Still, Zoro could deal with it, and he pushed Rob back before lashing out in every direction with a "Tatsu Maki!"

"Kamisori!" Rob barked, breaking away and dodging so fast that Zoro's attack did nothing to him, although it did hurl Kaku backward, grimacing angrily. Meanwhile, Rob launched Rankyaku based attack from his claws, smaller slashes that moved faster.

“36 Pound Cannon!” Zoro snarled, lashing out with one sword, creating a smaller, but just as condensed, attack which crashed into Rob’s, dissipating it. He then lashed out sideways to block a series of strikes from an angry Kaku before bending over backward so that a hammer blow from Tilestone went whizzing over where his head had been.

Many of the shipwrights had boiled out of the mansion to follow the fight as Zoro had retreated from the mansion, and now many of them, evidently deciding that regardless of the weird leopard man helping him, Kaku was still an ally and now raced forward to attack Zoro once more. Most, thankfully, didn’t, staying back and even hiding among the rubble of the mansion’s outer wall or the other houses around them.

“Tatsu Maki” Zoro roared once more, lashing out with what his mind labeled as a low-level version of the attack, not even straining his muscles to do it. The attack was still able to hurl most of the shipwrights away, but a stab from Kaku’s leg sent Zoro flying backward, although his crossed blades had blocked it.

“Dammit! He’s quite fast,” Kaku muttered, staring to where Zoro had landed, his swords up, and in a defensive stance as he smirked at the two of them, while bodies of unconscious shipwrights sprawled out in every direction. As Zoro watched, many of them got back up, joined by still more, who took this attack on their fellows as a sign that whatever their confusion on Rob’s new form, Zoro at least was still an enemy.

Unfortunately to Rob, the shipwrights once more crowding around Zoro were nothing but obstacles. He smashed into them, hurling several of the shipwrights out of his way to clash with Zoro, fists against steel, claws against steel, his claws so strong that they were able to bat aside Zoro’s blades, and so fast now that even Zoro, who had trained with Ranma for months now, was having trouble keeping up.

To say nothing of the shipwrights, who fell backward screaming from his backhand blows or smashed deliberately out of his way.

“ARGH!!

“Ah, my arm, I, I thought he was on our side!”

“UGGH!”

“God damn it, that just means that the leopard guy is an enemy of us too. So much for the old saying about the enemy of my enemy!” Tilestone roared as he lashed out with his hammer towards Rob, unable to get to Zoro through the mass of his fellows and disregarding the fact the leopard man had been working with Kaku before.

Ducking under the blow, Rob didn’t even look at him as he backhanded the man. The strike with his claws opened Tilestone’s face, as he thrust forward with the other fingers,

catching Zoro as he had turned away to block a blow from Kaku and causing the swordsman to take his first real wounds of this fight, a series of slashes along one side of his body.

Ignoring an opening in Zoro's defenses for just a moment, Kaku stared over Zoro's shoulder, watching as his fellow foreman fell, his throat and face slashed open. Even if Chopper or another doctor of similar skill had been right there, there was no way they would've saved that man's life.

Zoro grunted, rolling with a hit to his shoulder from Rob's tail, but a last-minute Tekkai had protected him from worse. He saw what had been done and grimaced, pulling out his white blade and spitting to one side while the few other shipwrights who were still on their feet or lying around wounded now stared in shock and horror. "You get it now! We weren't behind this! Someone's trying to set us against one another!"

Rob glared around, but before he could do anything, Kaku stepped to one side, the hilt of his sword smashing out into the man's side, knocking him unconscious. "No witnesses, Rob. We can't have anyone questioning the official report."

"Feh, I suppose you're right. Still, it isn't as if it would take much to convince the marines to perform a Buster Call on the whole island."

"Santoryu, Gyuki Yuzume!" Zoro growled, charging forward, two swords pressing forward like the bulls of a horn.

Despite the attack's size, Rob was about to simply take the blow of one sword on his chest before his eyes widened as he noted the white blade was covered in a black tarry substance. Desperately he dodged away, the cut going across his nose rather than his face, and he howled in pain, one hand rising to his wound, the other lashing out with Rankyaku claws that kept Zoro from pressing the advantage. Kaku then came in again, still grimacing as his four swords matched up with Zoro's three, once more the clang of weapons on weapons ringing out loud and clear.

Wiping the blood away, Rob ignored the shipwrights, who were now running away, retreating from the fight and carrying their wounded with them to a yagura bull that had bizarrely stayed nearby. Unseen by any of the three combatants, they pulled back entirely, moving down into the city proper, carrying word of what had happened and hoping to find reinforcements to deal with both foreign elements and the news that two of their own had betrayed the Galley-La Company.

Although they were not working well together, sometimes getting in one another's way or simply not being able to modify their tactics to work together, Kaku and Rob's abilities were such that Zoro was being pressed and forced to retreat away from the mansion toward one of the other dockyards to keep the two of them from circling him.

Zoro ducked under a blow from one sword, then danced around the thrust from another before flipping himself through a series of more slices, his own sword blades flashing out. The clamor of metal on metal rang out again and again in a matter of seconds before Kaku was forced onto the back foot, and Zoro was once more on his own feet, grinning viciously as he shot out an attack. "Karasuma Gari!"

The attack nearly struck, but then Rob was there again, smashing the attack aside with one of his own. Then thrusting out with his claws. "Shigan Madara!" Two Fingers from either hand flashed out with deadly penetrating force, fit to punch through steel.

This forced Zoro to dodge in turn, yet even as he did, he concentrated on a technique all of his own. "Ni Gorilla!" He thundered, as his arms suddenly grew at least half again as large. With that added strength, he was able to batter Rob's attack away.

"Daibutsu Giri!" Zoro went on the attack, his swords flashing so fast they all kept creating air pressure attacks around their blades.

Kaku grunted as the blade of one of his swords was shattered, and a cut appeared on his side from the outside of his thigh up to right below his armpit as he was hurled to one side. If it had been even a little bit more centered, that blow would've ended him. But he had already been moving when Zoro launched his attack.

Rob was able to dodge entirely, grimacing as he did so, but when he zoomed back in via Soru, he found his blows battered aside by Zoro's increased strength. He got in one good blow to the swordsman's shoulder but couldn't follow up on it, taking two hits to the chest that forced him to call upon Tekkai to defend. Zoro then used the momentum of Lucci's blow to gain more distance, whereupon Zoro tried to use another long-range attack, only to be interrupted by Rob's.

"Rankyaku Gaicho!" From his claws appeared a wide, oddly shaped air attack that looked almost like a bird as it flashed forward.

Not trusting this attack to be the same as others given its weird name, Zoro used a mix of Kami-E and Soru to dodge. This proved to be a very good thing as the attack didn't, as the others had, act as a blunt force with only a hint of a cutting edge. This attack acted like a hot knife through butter when it crashed into and through several houses lining the street they had been fighting down.

Grimacing, Zoro crouched down, dodging another attack, then lashing out with his own to block a blow from Kaku. Wado slid through the other man's defenses, cutting his shoulder, even as Kaku's own attack lashed out over Zoro's shoulder, the very edge of it opening his shoulder while the rest crashed into another house, the energy from the thrust punching through the house like a cannonball. A kick to Kaku's now swordless leg sent him stumbling,

and Rob, who had just charged in via his modified Soru, paused in place, shouting out “Tekkai Utsugi!” once more.

But even as Sendai was battered aside and Zoro’s hand shuddered, Yubashiri came around, gleaming with Busoshoku. The attack sliced across Rob’s stomach, and it was only his last-second flinch away and his Leopard body’s durability that allowed him to take that blow and not die instantly. Even so, he stumbled back, and that allowed Zoro to turn his attention to Kaku for a second, sending Kaku stumbling back, and it was only a last moment intervention from Kaku’s blade which stayed it.

“Lupus Fall!” Energy blades much like that of Rankyaku lashed out down towards Zoro from the shattered remains of Iceburg’s mansion. So fast were they, Zoro couldn’t dodge, and he was off-balance from just having begun to launch his own attack, so was forced to deflect them, then take one of them across his chest with Tekkai. His shirt was slashed open, and a gash opened up across his pecs but he was otherwise unwounded.

“Tekkai Kenpo Don Poro!” This was simply a punch, if a very powerful one, as again, Zoro was able to turn quickly, getting his swords up in an X-shape to block the blow. But he was still sent sailing, crashing into the mansion’s out wall, through it and out the other side where he bounced then tried to get his feet under him before crashing back-first into another, far smaller house, which collapsed around him.

Looking at Rob and Kaku, Jabra shook his head. “What the hell! You two are having trouble with one of the Straw Hats. That’s just sad.”

“Shut up!” Rob growled, still annoyed that Zoro was giving them so much trouble. “He’s tough, fast, and his use of Busoshoku makes him extremely formidable. We’re wearing him down, though.”

“He’s not a master of all of the Rokushiki, but he uses Geppo and Tekkai very well, and his own attacks are insane!” Kaku grumbled, wiping at the blood on his side. It wasn’t a deep cut thanks to his own Tekkai, but it was a sign that Zoro was someone they had to take extremely seriously. It was very, very rare for them to fight people who could simply overpower them like this, and it wasn’t a nice experience.

“Well, hopefully that attack...”

Jabra broke off as a voice shouted, “A hundred-and-twenty-six-pound cannon!” The same attack that Zoro had tried earlier in the fight which had ousted Kaku and Rob as something more than simple shipwrights lashed out from the dust and grime of the shattered house towards the trio.

They all scattered, but Zoro burst out of the cloud of debris, racing towards Kaku. As the only swordsman among the other opponents, Zoro wanted to deal with him first. It wasn’t

logical, but then again, combat wasn't logical either. The other two tried to get between them, but one of Zoro's blades got through, cutting Kaku on the side even as he tried to use Tekkai. Luckily for Kaku, Zoro hadn't coated Sendai with Busoshoku at that point, using it instead on the other two blades to ward off Jabra and Rob.

Rob dodged the attack coming his way entirely, but Jabra barely could redirect the slash coming towards him with his own Rankyaku-based attack. While the other two fell back, Rob was able to get in a blow to Zoro's chest, a simple punch that still hit with enough force to send Zoro flying once more despite his use of Tekkai. Zoro rolled with it before coming up in a combat stance, snarling around Wado Ichimonji's hilt.

"Damn it, I thought I had him there," Rob grumbled, becoming more annoyed as the fight went on and he was unable to end the Pirate Hunter's life. *And this is just the first mate?*

Grimacing, Kaku pushed himself to his feet, holding his side as he used his blade in his other hand as a crutch. "I certainly wish you had."

Seeing this, Rob ordered, "Turn into your new Zoan form." He gestured to his own wounds with which had begun to heal. "Zoan types heal fast."

"Damn right," Jabra muttered, looking down at his hands which had begun to heal. They weren't entirely 'Woken,' as it was called when Zoan types completely connected to their Devil Fruit power and the enhanced endurance of their Zoan forms but both had been forced through a lot of training to bring out their body's ability to heal.

"Fine, damn it," Kaku grumbled, then with a thought, he began to shift into his new form. His form grew, becoming much larger than either of the others, at least two stories tall, maybe even more, although most of that was neck. His legs and arms too were really long, and Kaku's face... his face was mostly nose now. A big, square nose, with small ears set to either side and eyes above it.

Staring at this and comparing the giraffe-Kaku to the leopard Rob and the wolf Jabra, Zoro shook his head with a sigh. "Lame. Utterly lame."

"Bahahaha, I know, right!?" Jabra bawled in laughter, shaking his head.

"SH, shut up! I happen to like giraffes! Besides, looks don't matter nearly as much as power!" With that, Kaku reached down with one hand and began to spin his body around it quickly in a circle, his elongated neck giving him extra momentum. Spinning fast enough to look like a top, energy flashed out from his outstretched legs in a circle-shaped Rankyaku, which flashed out in every direction. "Rankyaku Amane Dachi!"

Grimacing, Zoro gathered Busoshoku into his body and blades, thrusting forward and cutting it to either side. Busoshoku met insanely powerful air attack, and the air attack broke

around him, cutting deep into the ground on either side. Meanwhile, Rob and Jabra had bounced up and over the attack before Jabra growled out, "Hey, you bastard, you meant to let that hit me too, didn't you!?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. It was simply coincidence," Kaku muttered before attacking Zoro once more. Sticking his swords into the ground, Kaku lashed out with one of his massive legs. "Rankyaku Rodan!"

The Dragon Sever attack created what looked like a Rankyaku type attack shaped into a dragon. Alone it wouldn't have been much of a threat to Zoro, but Rob instantly also launched his own attack, as did Jabra. For Rob, this was another Gaicho attack, the one that had done so much damage to the houses all around them.

And Jabra launched his own Rankyaku version. "Rankyaku Koro!" This attack created a series of air attacks that seemed to be wolf-like, bouncing across the ground towards Zoro.

But Zoro simply stood there, and a second before the attacks struck, his whole body was covered with Busoshoku as were his blades, which flashed out an instant before the blows struck. The attacks simply burst, doing horrendous damage to the area around Zoro, but nothing at all to the swordsman himself. Then as the attack faded, so too did Zoro's Busoshoku, and Zoro leaped into the attack, launching himself towards Jabra, who was the nearest of his opponents. "Rengoku Oni Giri!"

Jabra met this assault with his own, growling out, "Tekkai Kenpo, Okami Hajiki!" His mastery of Tekkai allowing him to move without destroying his body like a neophyte would, this move made Jabra's punches almost as hard as steel. 'Almost' being the keyword, as his hands began to bleed badly almost at once as he exchanged blows and slashes with Zoro before Rob and Kaku intervened.

Kaku's attack got there first, a thrust from his now extremely square-like nose as he shouted out, "Bigan!" this was a Shigan-style attack that basically used Kaku's enlarged nose as the normal Shigan would a finger, the same tremendous penetrating power in a much larger form.

Zoro barely got disengaged Sendai Kitetsu from his attack on Jabra, who leaped out of the way of Kaku's attack, grumbling once more about how Kaku had been aiming for them both. But Zoro was able to deflect Kaku's nose and then lashed out at his elongated neck, only for Rob to appear seemingly out of nowhere, lashing out with his own Shigan attack.

Unable to protect himself with Busoshoku in time, Zoro used Tekkai. When the Shigan blows struck, Zoro also used its momentum to back away, using Soru once more to gain space. This allowed Kaku and Rob to hit him with more Rankyaku style attacks, which hurled Zoro down the street in a welter of blood before he crashed into and through one of the previously destroyed houses, causing still more of it to collapse.

“Fuck me, that guy was tough!” Jabra grumbled, staring at the rubble.

“Agreed,” Kaku said, before hurriedly raising his blade as Zoro burst out of the rubble in an insanely fast Soru, crossing the distance between them so quickly Kaku barely got one of his swords up in time to stop a blow. As he did so, the Giraffe Zoan stared at Zoro. “What... in the...”

Instead of three swords, he now wielded nine, his body had somehow gone through some kind of change. It was as if Zoro’s battle spirit had exploded out of him, transforming him into a three-headed, six-armed devil.

“Kiki Kyutoryu: Ashura!” Zoro intoned before lashing out in every direction with another attack as the others closed in.

Kaku's second sword shattered, as did the arm holding it, and the next blow nearly sliced his head off, cutting deep into the top of his shoulder and sending him flying backward with a cry of agony and a welter of blood.

Once more, Jabra blocked the blows coming him with difficulty, his hands slowly being sliced to the bone despite his greater durability as a Wolf Zoan and he was flung sideways by the impact.

But Rob was fast enough to get in underneath Zoro’s attacks, taking two slices across his shoulders and chest, which caused a few superficial wounds thanks to his enhanced Zoan-durability. But he disdained that, wishing to land a blow in turn. His fists thrust forward in tandem as his entire body tensed, one muscle at a time leading into his hand. When that pulse released into Zoro, it multiplied by a hundred the energy a normal Shigan would have had, creating a lot of internal damage to the target as for the first time in this fight, Rob broke out something that even the other CP9 users didn’t know. “Rokushiki secret technique, Rokugan!”

Zoro grunted in agony as the blow struck, blood pouring from his mouth as he was hurled backward. His Ashura technique faded as he went, crashing into and through the Dock 2 doorway, hurling it off its hinges as he continued, crashing into and destroying one of the ships there.

As the rubble collapsed onto the Straw Hat’s first mate, Rob grimaced, looking down at his chest and shoulders, wiping away the blood. *Another inch that would have crippled me*, he thought to himself, shaking his head.

“Damn, I hope that blow of yours put him down!” Jabra grumbled, staring down at his hands even as they started to heal.

“I don’t think so,” Rob scowled as he stared at the nearly completed ship Zoro had been smashed into.

Turning, the other two saw that Rob was right. Zoro had already pushed himself out of the debris. A trickle of blood was slowly dripping from his mouth, his upper body mass of black and blue and cuts from the debris of the ship, his breath was coming in wheezing gasps. But he still stood, and as they watched, he raised his blades once more, including the one in his mouth.

“Damn it!” Jabra growled out, dancing to one side. “Spread out, come at him from separate angles!”

“Enough, the man is on his last legs. Finishing him off will be easy,” Rob grunted, crouching low, prepared to charge forward the instant he saw an opening, before pausing, staring as the black coating of Busoshoku once more began to appear on Zoro’s swords. “Or perhaps not.”

“What does it take to put you down, I wonder,” Kaku grumbled with a wince of agony. But he still pushed himself to his feet, raising a sword in his one remaining hand, the other arm useless for now. But his legs at least were still working, and he prepared to attack with his enhanced Rankyaku once more.

For his part, Zoro stared at the CP9 members facing him through bleary, hazy eyes. His heart was so loud in his ears it drowned out nearly everything. His legs felt weak, and his insides felt as if they had been pounded flat and then rolled out like a pancake. And yet, despite that. Zoro was almost calm. Because Zoro could still feel them. The will, the subdued consciousness in his swords and all of them were willing to see this fight to the end.

On top of that was the weight of his promises. And he could sense the breath of the world around him. *All things... all things can be cut, including speed, pain, or even will.* With that, his Ashura form slowly forming around him again, looking, if anything, even more, fearsome than before, a black aura spreading from it while the skin of the apparition had turned red. The eyes were all now glowing, and the horns were larger.

“You can’t kill me,” Zoro intoned as he stalked forward, slowly walking towards Rob Lucci, his swords now fully covered in Busoshoku once more, which then also began to move up over his body, covering him entirely for only the second time in this fight. “I am going to be the best swordsman in the world. I am the first mate of the man who will be the Pirate King, and I promised him. I promised him I wouldn’t lose! Not again!”

With that, Zoro crouched down, staring at Rob, as the aura of the demon finished forming around him once more. His swords began to spin, each sword multiplied by two, yet somehow still retaining their Busoshoku covering as his wrists began to swing them in circles. He shot forward then, so fast that Jabra and Kaku could barely follow him.

Rob backpedaled using Soru, then moved in swiftly, his legs a blur in the air, tapping down onto the air five times as fast as they would have to for Geppo, shooting him forward, faster and faster until he disappeared even from Jabra and Kaku’s sight. His upper body too

began to shift, his leopard form shifting as he once more turned back to his normal, far bulkier and more powerful form as he struck out with both fists close together, once more gathering all of his body's energy into the attack to create even more internal injury than before as he launched himself forward with Kamisori. "Sai Dai Rin Rokugan!"

But as fast as Rob was moving, Zoro could keep up with him and a second after they both disappeared, the moment of stillness shattered as they slammed into one another, Zoro swords flashing out as Zoro roared, "Santoryu Secret Technique: Black Clad Worlds!" Like Zoro's Three Thousand Worlds, this attack relied heavily on Zoro spinning the swords in his hands at an insane speed along with turning his head at just the right moment. But this attack was made with his swords laced with his Busoshoku.

Rob Lucci's durability was insane thanks to his Zoan form and training in the Rokushiki. He could tank hits even without Tekkai as a Jaguar Zoan that would have killed even another CP9 user using that technique. And his own blows were going home at the same time he hit. He could feel one of his fists crash into Zoro's Busoshoku-clad chest and another into one of Zoro's blades, which lost its black coloring under the impact, the blade shattering under the strength of the hit.

None of this mattered because as Rob's attacks went home, the other two blades were still clad in Busoshoku. And this time, he couldn't dodge as he had the times before, the attack just too fast, and Rob had concentrated too much on closing for his own attack. They cut clean through Rob, hurling his body backward in pieces as blood exploded everywhere.

Having been standing to one side of Rob, Kaku had faced one of Zoro's Ashura form. Yet despite the fact the Ashura form was basically made out of Zoro's aura, those blades were just as 'real' when they struck out, just as covered by Busoshoku. While he slashed out strongly with his Giraffe-given strength as he could in his wounded state, Kaku, sword shattered, his arm following suit, and then he gasped as another black-clad blade caught him straight across his long throat, ending his life not as messily as Rob had died but just as permanently.

Of the three Zoans, only Jabra could dodge entirely, having been just a bit warier than the other two, a bit more ready to retreat. Even so, he still lost his forearm, sliced clean off his body by a slash from another one of the Ashura-form blades.

But beyond that, he was able to roll out of the way, howling in agony. Coming to rest against the outer wall of Dock 1, he quickly ripped off his sash from around his waist, tying it off on his arm to create a tourniquet, covering the stub of his arm. So vicious, so desperate was his attempt to cut off the blood flow that it worked quickly, although quite painfully. And after a few moments, the crippled Wolf Zoan pushed himself to his feet.

But as devastating as his attacks had been, Zoro had not come through the clash unscathed. While he had started his charge and his attack covered in Busoshoku, that hadn't lasted long, and he had concentrated on keeping his Busoshoku around his blades. This meant

that Rob's last attack had indeed hit home and had done so much internal damage to Zoro that something within him had exploded, and several of his ribs had exploded, so much so that bone shards had erupted out of his skin.

Yet Zoro refused to fall. He stood there, staring across the intervening distance to Jabra, his one working arm still holding Sandai Kitetsu, Wado Ichimonji still clamped in bloody teeth as Yubashiri, its spirit no more, fell to his feet. He couldn't move. He barely could feel anything but the hilts of his swords. But Zoro refused to fall, his legs locking him in place.

Staring, Jabra felt fear for the first time in a very long time. He hadn't had time to feel it before, but now, staring at this battered, broken revenant standing over the sliced apart remains of Rob Lucci, he did. Shaking his head, Jabra pushed himself to his feet, psyching himself up, then laughed. "Haha, ahah, thanks for getting rid of those assholes. Now I'm the strongest in CP9! No one will ever question it again, especially after I finish you off."

With that, Jabra raced forward, raising his remaining hand, lashing out with his remaining hand. "Tekkai Kenpo, Rokaru Area Network!"

This attack almost seemed to do the same thing Zoro's aura had done earlier, doubling his hand into several different punches as Jabra struck. And Zoro couldn't move, not even to raise his sword to block. He simply stared as death came for him, unwilling to show fear even now.

But before the blow could land, Chopper was there charging forward, howling out in a battle cry, "Heavy Gong!"

The blow took Jabra completely unawares, crashing into the shoulder of his already maimed arm and hurling him to the side, where he stumbled. Recovering, he then turned, lashing out at the other Zoan type. "Tekkai Okami Hajiki!"

"Guard Point, Tekkai style!" Chopper took the blows on his seemingly soft furry shell before shifting into another of his Rumble-ball's forms, dodging around several more Rankyaku. "Speed point!"

Jabra growled angrily but charged after him. The swordsman could wait for now. "A deer should know not to take on a wolf!"

"Shows what you know," Chopper shouted. "Wolves only take on the weakest of the herd, and if they try more, they get gored! I'm not weak! I'm not going to let anyone die on my watch, not again!" He charged in, getting under Jabra's reach in his normal form before shifting into his enhanced monster body. "Kokutei Cross!"

With Luffy's help, this speed attack had become even faster, even stronger. Several hundred blows lashing out as if they were but four or five. And each blow hit much harder too.

Despite his Tekkai technique, Jabra felt them, causing the long-whiskered wolf to grimace and having to stop moving to use the defensive technique caused him to stumble. But he was still able to grab Chopper's forearm before he could pull back, his claws sinking into the meat of the other Zoan's arm, pulling him in and opening his mouth as he lunged for Chopper's throat. "Wolf Chomp!"

At first, Chopper tried to shift forms, first to guard point, then to his normal body. But the first failed since Jabra was still clinging to one arm, and Jabra reacted so quickly that, Chopper couldn't get away, forcing him to dodge a series of chomps. The assassin's grip had held on just long enough thanks to his claws for Jabra to clench his grip tighter, keeping a hold on Chopper's now smaller arm.

"Fine then, let's see who's stronger!" with that, Chopper shifted back into his monster body, going for a headbutt. Jabra leaned back, letting this move miss, and then chomped forward again. But Chopper's other arm came up, blocking the attempt to bite at him, grabbing at the other Zoan's jaw. There the two Zoan types grappled, strength versus strength. Slowly, Jabra's blood loss and his lack of an arm allowed Chopper to gain the upper hand, pushing the other man back hard with both hands and gaining enough room to throw a punch with the arm, not keeping Jabra's jaws at bay.

A blow to the jaw sent Jabra reeling, losing several teeth, yet a kick caused Chopper to fall to his knees, and a knee to the face had him seeing stars even as Jabra's grip finally loosened, Chopper's nose shattering under the blow.

"Out of the way, Chopper!" Shouted a female voice.

In response, Chopper instantly shrunk himself down to his normal body, rolling away. He watched from the ground as a massive palm made out of thousands of other hands appeared, thrusting out of the nearby wall, crashing into Jabra with bone-crunching force with not enough warning for Jabra to activate his Tekkai. And without that, even his Zoan durability had a limit, which was exceeded badly by this assault. His face was squashed as his upper body shattered as he was hurled backward.

Seeing the enemy Wolf Zoan dealt with, Chopper instantly rushed towards Zoro. The swordsman had finally fallen, landing heavily on his face and chest, doing more damage to himself. But when Chopper rolled him over, he was shocked to see Zoro was not only still alive but even had his eyes open, staring at him.

He actually even grinned at the little doctor, holding up his fist, which had previously contained the hilt of Yubashiri. Nearby, Zoro's other swords lay, almost like Zoro had taken the time to set them on the ground rather than let them fall. "H, hey Doc, g, guess we won h, huh?"

Chopper shook his head. "Shut up and concentrate on staying alive," he ordered.

With that, Chopper went to work, first closing the wounds with several layers of wrap over each while also setting up an IV tube nearby. Blood loss was the first issue he had to deal with, but luckily Luffy and Zoro had the same blood type as a few of the Skypieans, and he had filled up several bags just in case weeks ago. *After that, I'll have to figure out what else is broken in Zoro without letting him lose too much blood while I do it.*

Not knowing what internal injuries Zoro had taken yet, Chopper couldn't give him the same kind of numbing agent as he had Iceburg and didn't dare try to knock him unconscious so he could work. Then a sword hilt appeared, pushing into Zoro's mouth, held by one Robin's hands. "Bite on that, Zoro. And yes, I think you can say we have won the field here."

"What happened with you, woman?" Zoro grunted even as he complied.

"I was followed by that large-mouthed fellow. But he didn't have enough tactical sense to deal with me. I led him into a trap, captured him, and then simply summoned up several thousand legs all around him. At which point I used Rankyaku from all of them or as many as I could anyway to pummel him into unconsciousness. I then snapped his neck and spine, which was much easier when he was unconscious and unable to use Tekkai," Robin stated matter-of-factly.

Standing up on extremely weary legs, Robin looked off into the distance, where the sound of cannonades could still be heard, while behind her, dozens of hands and legs started to carry Jabra to the nearest waterway. They would dispose of him as Kalifa had been disposed of earlier by Chopper. "It remains to be seen how much it has cost us." Robin turned her attention back to Chopper, only now noticing his ruined features. "Chopper, you..."

"My face will heal quickly. Zoan types have incredible healing powers, although nothing like Luffy's. My eye..." Chopper shrugged then, to the surprise of both other pirates, smiled even as he kept working on Zoro. "I guess I'm going to be the first one in the crew to be a real pirate."

"W, what's that supposed to mean?" Zoro grumbled around the hilt in his mouth. To Robin's astonishment, the swordsman hadn't cried out or even clenched his teeth despite the pain he must've been in as Chopper continued work on sewing him up.

"Well, to be a proper pirate, don't you need an eyepatch?"

Despite the pain this caused him and Chopper's shout of "Don't laugh asshole, your chest's been perforated, damn it!" Zoro laughed at that for a full minute.

Robin had turned her attention over to the three men who had just come out of the battered, blasted mansion. At the same time, other shipwrights started to run in from every direction, carrying weapons. She looked at them all, then back to Iceburg, who was basically

being carried by Lulu and Paulie. Yet his eyes were clear as he looked back at her with regret and guilt in his eyes.

“We aren’t going to have any more trouble, are we?” Robin asked as several of the shipwrights who had been part of the initial battle came up behind their boss. Enough time had passed for them to regain their senses from how Robin is dealt with them earlier since she had merely choked them all into unconsciousness rather than snapping spines or other bones.

“No, no, we’re not,” Lulu spoke for his boss, shaking his head with a sigh. “I, I heard Kaku address that leopard guy as Rob and saw how he killed Tilestone. I also heard Kaku saying they wouldn’t leave any witnesses. After that, it was kind of obvious whose side we should be on, even before Iceburg-san told me about how Chopper saved his life twice over from the bullet and that bitch Kalifa.”

As Iceburg turned and shouted towards the shipwrights coming in from deeper into the dockyards, Robin heaved a sigh of relief. She watched as he explained how Rob and Kaku seemed to have been plants and how Kalifa had attempted to kidnap him. No mention of the plans of Pluton she had been asking about was made, of course, but that didn’t matter right now.

“I don’t know who was behind all this, and I don’t know why, but it certainly wasn’t the Straw Hats,” Iceburg finished, as Lulu and Paulie continued to carry him forward. “Get the word out to the shipwrights down in Pirate’s Cove and throughout the island! The Straw Hats aren’t our enemies today. It remains to be seen who is, but whatever else, I want the fighting to stop!”

OOOOOO

In the air above the cove, the battle was slowly turning against Luffy. With the weaker officers out of the fight and the ships dealt with, the Vice Admirals were freer to engage Luffy with Busoshoku and Rankyaku based attacks without worrying about killing their own. Despite the uncaring attitude Onigumo had shown toward the regular marines, the officers at least could not be simply brushed aside.

The only advantage Luffy still had over his opponents was his greater mastery of aerial combat and Geppo. This allowed him to dance around most attacks, and he could tell that the Vice Admirals were tiring. But the Vice Admirals’ skill with Busoshoku was slowly pushing Luffy’s own Busoshoku to the limit, and his blows weren’t doing enough damage to his four primary enemies.

One on one Luffy could have beaten any of his attackers. Two on one, Luffy could have beaten them if only thanks to his ki healing. Three would have been pushing it, but again, Luffy had a **very** large bag of tricks. Four though, with a few other officers now working together far better than they had been? Luffy was being slowly battered under.

And Luffy still dared not use his new logia powers, not yet. The instant they saw him use a logia power like the Goro Goro, the marines would pull back, call in help, and they would have to deal with admirals coming after them. *And even with my Logia powers, I'm not certain I could beat Aokiji, let alone him and another admiral at the same time.*

Although even without his logia powers, the marines were still being hammered in turn. The Marines valued working together and organization but only among the lower ranks. Once you got to captain range, that went away and this fight was still showing that to the marine's cost. In contrast, Luffy, both in this life and the last, had trained just as much on crowd-based combat as one-on-one combat.

Fights like these were his bread-and-butter. Even with the fewer numbers facing him, Luffy made it very hard to hit him and not one another.

Below, thanks to Luffy's use of the Haoshoku, the Resolve had slipped back into the cove. There, an enemy ship had come in after them, but Laki and Resolve had dealt with it, leading it onto the wreckage of one of the other ships and then fleeing inland via a small stream. Now Laki was fighting her own fight against two officers, the acid man and a man who used chakrams who were leading a mixed crew of the two ships beyond the port and those who had been able to wake up from the Haoshoku.

Luckily the locals had retreated early on, when the marine ship in the cove started to fire at the Resolve, even as it retreated deeper inland via a waterway. The various fires and warehouses made for good cover for Laki against the marines who had come ashore. Her skates, moreover, made her nearly as fast as a Soru user in short sprints and she still had more than a few dials to use.

Even more thankfully, the marines didn't really understand her Sky Combat skills. The vice-admirals had read what Hina had told the High Command about it, but there was a big difference between that and seeing it for themselves and they had neglected to inform their men of how deadly it could be.

Seeing her still skating around the wharf leading the marines away from where the Resolve had begun to move slowly upriver, Luffy allowed himself to feel relief, for about three seconds. Then a blow smashed into his face, hitting his eye. If not for his own Busoshoku, that blow would've possibly blinded him. The next second, Luffy twisted his head to one side, dodging a slash from one of the others, then a Rankyaku from another slammed into his chest.

Luffy retaliated, a Finger Bomb nail crashing into Strawberry's neck with enough force to cause him to gag even with his Busoshoku in place.

Yet Dalmatian was on his left and lashed out before Luffy could defend himself and Luffy grunted as the blow struck a part of his body that wasn't currently covered by Busoshoku. The

blow broke Luffy's elbow, making that arm useless for a few seconds while his ki healing went to work.

Ignoring that, Luffy charged forward and down into a few other marine officers, using their bodies to block a series of sword techniques from Onigumo's advance. Then he bounded up and towards Strawberry, who was still touching his neck gingerly. While Onigumo dropped below, coming back up towards Luffy, Luffy closed with the other sword swinger, catching that man in the side of the head. He then ducked under another blow from his target, hammering a blow into that man's side.

Momonga caught him on his collarbone with a sword strike, then a kick caused Luffy to fly through the air several meters before he could regain control of himself. The next sword strike caused Luffy's ribs to creak even through his Tekkai, but thankfully the blade wasn't covered with Busoshoku and he merely grunted in pain instead of being cut in half. This let him lash out with several Rankyaku forcing the marines to defend themselves for a moment, backing away as they did.

There was a second of wary inaction for a second as Luffy stared around at the surrounding marines. "You know you're only delaying the inevitable and making it worse for your followers," Momonga said with a sigh. "I would have thought if you wanted to give your people a chance to live, you would have surrendered by now. The more you fight, the more reason you are giving us to capture all of you."

Onigumo barely stopped himself from glaring at his fellow officer. It was true that their primary mission was to kill or capture Straw Hat but that didn't mean they would let the rest of the crew go. The Buster Call had been ordered on the entire crew, after all. Yet Onigumo supposed, Momonga was trying to get under Straw Hat's skin, perhaps weaken his resolve a bit.

Dalmatian, alas, didn't. "You forget he's got Nico Robin on his crew. And willingly too. The Devil Child is a long-time enemy of the World Government. We will be capturing this day," he announced. "You and she are our main targets, but even with all you've done today to our fleet, in the long term, I still think the Devil Child is the more dangerous to the world peace, and the World Government are bound to defend."

He barked a laugh, sounding even more doglike than his partial Zoan transformation would allow. "I wager the World Government will waste no time sending her to the tender mercies of Sadi-chan in Impel Down. The Devil Child has a lot to answer for, above and beyond knowing forbidden knowledge."

"I'm getting sick and tired of hearing that Devil Child crap from you Marines," Luffy growled, suddenly no longer bothering to dodge. Instead, once more his entire body was now covered by Busoshoku, as it hadn't for a while, something that had fooled his attackers into thinking he hadn't the willpower left to sustain it.

Then he reached out, grabbing a captain's fist and hurling him into Dalmatian. Dalmatian canceled his own technique, and Momonga and Onigumo were both in a position to lash out with their own Busoshoku imbued attacks. But Luffy simply took them, and when Dalmatian had hurled the captain away, Luffy was in his face, a hand grabbing at Dalmatian's black-clad throat, pulling him in to stare into Dalmatian's eyes.

"I'm sick and tired of it, especially when you people are the ones who gave her that label. When you **fucks** are the ones who gave her no choice but to become a devil to survive! Since when is just living a crime?"

The next blow that struck Dalmatian had not only Busoshoku behind, but all the fury of his Haoshoku, which had escaped Luffy's control at the taunt. Luffy had never used Haoshoku in conjunction before, and he wasn't certain how he had done so now.

But when that blow struck, Dalmatian's chest, still covered in Busoshoku, shattered, and he was hurled to the side with a cry of pain. Yet, he retained his place in the fight, even shaking off one of the other officers.

The other Marine admirals glared at him, pointing their swords at Luffy once more as they circled around him.

"Nico Robin was judged a threat to world peace, and in the name of absolute justice, she will remain a threat! A threat to world peace, a threat to the world government, that cannot be allowed. Every time you prove yourself strong, every time you stand against us, every punch you throw, you make yourself more of an enemy of the World Government! Of the real power in this world," Momonga announced.

"Look at my face," Luffy said, smirking. "Do I look like I care? The moment I declared that I would be Pirate King, I knew that the World Government would be my enemy. The moment my first mate said that he would become the greatest swordsman in the world, I knew. The moment my navigator told me her dream to make a complete full map of the world, we knew! The moment I took Nico Robin into my crew, I knew very well what it meant. And if you think that you can intimidate me, if you think you can make me give up my crew, then you are dumber than a rock!"

With that, he charged forward, straight at Strawberry, who readied his twin blades. Having taken a sword from another marine, he swung them forward, in a two swords style attack, while Momonga moved in from the side, and Onigumo closed in, roaring as his sabers thrust.

But Luffy took his blows, not retreating an inch. At the same time, over the black of his Busoshoku blue ki began to glow, so bright and condensed that it hid the arms it was surrounding.

Which was what Luffy had wanted. Because as he did so, the arm within disappeared, flashing out in a flurry of blows, several thousand blows in a second. It was as if Luffy had changed his own arm into a rail gun, using his own fist, clad in Busoshoku as the nail, hammering into Dalmatian's defenses.

The speed was such that even a vice-admiral's own Busoshoku could not withstand that continued blows, all of which came at him at insane speeds. With the wounds he had already taken this proved too much, and with a cry of despair, Dalmatian's arm lost its Busoshoku and then broke under Luffy's continued blows in several places.

A roundhouse kick sent the man flying away, and Luffy used the momentum to bounce through the air and away from the other two before they could converge on his position again. Another second, and Luffy was back in front of him, having shouted out, "Flash Step!" and just appearing there as if he had used Soru only even faster. Luffy's leg flashed out in a kick that caught the wounded Dalmatian in the head as Luffy roared, "Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken!"

The renewed assault knocked Dalmatian clear out and maybe shattered his jaw along with a few teeth, and the unconscious vice-admiral fell, plummeting down to crash into the wharves far below.

Turning, Luffy grinned through a growing sense of exhaustion. Using Busoshoku and ki simultaneously was incredibly hard, especially after all the hits he'd taken while using Busoshoku. But a bit of arrogance might make them angry enough to keep making mistakes, and he smirked the same smirk that always made his rivals go crazy back in his past life as he looked at the other three vice admirals. "Then there were three."

Roaring in rage, the three remaining vice-admirals and the few surviving captains charged and Luffy raced upwards. Yet now, Luffy could feel himself starting to slow down. Blows were beginning to get through his defenses, and at one point, someone slashed at his neck with a sword before he could cover the zone with Busoshoku. This opened up a long, thin wound despite him dodging most of the strike, which began to heal even as Luffy fell back.

Seeing this, Onigumo felt he could sense victory despite Luffy's recent demolition of Dalmatian. "That's the way, keep up the pressure. No matter how many of us die today, it will have been for the sake of slaying this pirate and for Absolute Justice!"

However, even as victory seemed to be slowly coming into sight for the marines, the battle had come to an end elsewhere.

OOOOOO

"Get me a Den Den Mushi," Iceburg ordered, staring out to where the cannons could still be heard. It had taken Lulu and Paulie about ten minutes to help him up onto the tallest still-standing rooftop they could find, but neither man had even thought to ask Nico Robin for

help. By which time Iceburg, Mayor of Water 7, had figured out both what to do now and what to say to save both the innocent Straw Hats and to keep his town from falling over a precipice he could all too easily see ahead of them.

“Whatever is going on out there, our people need to know who the real enemies were. The marines, the marines are being used...” he murmured to himself.

Paulie looked at him, and Lulu snorted. “Right, used, heh, just like those assassins were.”

“Probably. But that is going to be the party line, Lulu. Unless you want us to no longer be part of the World Government? And look to the pirates for both protection and our livelihoods?”

Iceburg waited, and Lulu sighed, nodding while Paulie just grunted. “You really think our people are going to be able to pull back from that fight once they learn the marines are attacking your saviors rather than your attackers?”

“Not really. But no one, not even the World Government or their own superiors, can blame us for defending ourselves to a certain point. It’s forcing both sides back from that point that will be hard.”

Not ten minutes later, Iceburg’s words had spread. So loved was he by the regular people of Water 7 that his simple word was enough to turn them from attacking the various pirates – several groups of which had been trapped ashore - to moving into position to attack the marines fighting Laki. But the fight in the air was beyond them.

While his people were now moving in to fire on the marines and even boarding their ships, Iceburg, with Lulu and Paulie both acting like bewildered guard dogs and crutches, retreated to the top of the largest building he could, with a massive telescope and two Den Den Mushis. One of which was tied into the local network, allowing him to coordinate things as best he could this far removed. Neither of his foremen were willing to let him anywhere close to the fighting. The other was connected to the international Mushi Network.

From there, Iceburg called a certain individual in the World Government. His name was... well, Iceburg didn’t honestly know his name. He only knew his job. The man acted as Chief Procurer of the World Government along with several Tenryubito. He knew money and politics like the back of his hand and knew everyone in the marines and WG. Or at least, he did to the extent that Iceburg cared to contemplate.

After a few moments of discussion, the man connected him to another individual, who needed no introduction. It cost Iceburg quite a bit in name-trading, and it would cost Galley-La a few commissions, but hopefully, it would be worth it.

“This is Admiral Sengoku. To what do I owe the pleasure, Mr. Iceburg?” The Admiral of the Fleet frowned thoughtfully as he wondered what this was about, a niggle of worry going through him.

“I would just like to say thank you for your marine’s quick action. However, I believe that your marines are now proving to be as much of a problem as the attack on me,” Iceburg answered, praying internally that this was going to work.

For a moment, Sengoku blanked. “I’m sorry? What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t know? I simply assumed that your marines were acting on evidence that the Straw Hats were behind the attack on me,” Iceburg made certain his voice was as incredulous as he could make it. “Someone tried to assassinate me, a group of black-clad individuals, three of whom had been posing as members of my company. Hell, one of them was my secretary, for god’s sake! Whoever planned out the attack on me was thinking long term, for **some** reason.”

He let that sink in for a full minute, letting what he wasn’t saying speak very, very loudly. Only when the tension was so thick you could cut it did Iceburg go on. “Two others were new to the island, but their arrival must have been some kind of signal. But they attempted to use the recent arrival of the Straw Hats to mask their activities. This failed horribly. Now I have five dead assassins, and your marines, who must have been on the heels of the two unknowns to react so swiftly, are attacking the Straw Hats who came to my defense.”

“Are you saying you are in cahoots with pirates?” Sengoku interrupted, more to let himself think than anything else as he went over what he knew of CP9’s mission on Water 7. It had first been assigned by the World Government, but a year ago, Aokiji had been put in place as a backup just in case, and he had been briefed on it. *Because the World Government feared Nico Robin’s interaction with Iceburg. Which seems to have happened. Beyond that, a Buster Call was thought necessary as a backup if Nico Robin found one of the ancient weapons or the plans for Pluton came to light in the hands of someone willing to build it. But it seems to have been used now on the Straw Hats, and perhaps all of Water 7? Only, it’s not going so well if Iceburg is able to call me like this.*

“Hah! Nice one, Admiral. But you know that Water 7 supplies ships to all customers so long as they are willing to pay, much like nearly every other shipbuilding company out there. We couldn’t survive otherwise since World Government and marine jobs wouldn’t be enough to support our population.” Iceburg faked a real politician’s laugh before abruptly becoming serious. “That despite how many of the marine’s best ships or the World Government’s... specialized vessels come from our docks.”

Again, he let that sink in before he moved on. “But it seems as if your Marines decided to fight the wrong group. While a portion of my own men and some of the Straw Hats fought the assassins off, your Marines attacked the pirate ship and its captain, again I’m assuming

because they thought the Straw Hats were behind the attack on me. Which would be both wrong, and frankly, from here, I can see it isn't going too well for either side."

That was something of an exaggeration. Even with his telescope, Iceburg couldn't make out any real details. But he only saw three marine vessels out there, all of them trailing smoke, a lot of sinking wreckage, and at least one of the marine's ships was still on fire.

"Now, I want to give you Marines the benefit of the doubt. But my people are already moving to defend our island if the marines keep attacking blindly and killing our people, and I think some are even calling for help from all the nearby islands."

As Iceburg spoke, Sengoku's mind was racing. *This has all the earmarks of one of Akainu's ideas, but if the assassination squad has been defeated...* "How bad is it?" he asked slowly.

"Surely that's not important. What is important is making certain that you Marines stop killing my people accidentally! They bombarded one of our coves, and I'm getting reports of a lot of wounded and a few dead already. At this point, we can still say that this was all a mistake, but I would hate for it to go further."

Sengoku's blood froze. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that if the marines don't stop fighting and accidentally killing my people, I will order my shipwrights to outright attack your Marines, then reach out to a Yonko for protection," Iceburg stated bluntly.

That made Admiral Sengoku clench his teeth in anger. "You're playing a dangerous game, Iceburg!"

"So are you," Iceburg growled back, not giving an inch. It was very easy to stand up against Sengoku right now when he could see the flames and fires, could hear the sounds of cannon and even a few screams on the wind as the one burning ship kept firing into the cove blindly in order to try and hit the pirate ship. "From what I can see, your Marines might even be losing right now, although I can't be certain from here. If that's the case, surely, it's better for both of us to cut our losses rather than me go public with the idea that the World Government decided to assassinate me for what people would assume was no good reason whatsoever, forcing me into the arms of a Yonko, here in Paradise."

If the Buster Call is losing, then my options become even more limited. Especially now, with what we are planning in the near future. I need more information, damn it, Sengoku scowled. "Wait one moment."

Thinking about it, he contacted Vice-Admiral Dalmatian, knowing him as one of the more levelheaded of the vice admirals and not quite as bulldog tenacious as Momonga. "Dalmatian, are you attacking Water 7 right now?" he asked as soon as the pickup answered.

The man on the other side was breathing raggedly and seemed to even be in pain, which was not a good sign, although it was one that Sengoku had suspected. Whatever else, Monkey D. Luffy had proven he was a combatant anyone would have to take seriously, regardless of numbers.

"I, Sir, this, this isn't Admiral Dalmatian. I'm Very Good, his flag captain. Dalmatian is, is unconscious, er, possibly with a c, cracked skull, er, his arm is just... mangled, and um, he... er... we don't have many doctors left, I don't..."

"Calm down, sailor!" Sengoku barked. "Pull yourself together and give me an actual report." He waited until the man's breathing seemed to come under control again and then went on. "Now, what has happened?"

"Sir! Under Admiral Akainu's orders, Admiral Onigumo had us stationed within the Water 7 Weather Zone with a plan to attack the Straw Hats in conjunction with a CP9 operation. I do not know how well the CP9 side of things has gone, but we have not... we did not make enough allowances for the impact of Haoshoku among our men or Straw Hat's mastery of Busoshoku."

Taking this in, Sengoku could only wince. *So, this has gone very fucking badly then. Damn it, Akainu, you should have known sending numbers against a Haoshoku user would be next to useless.* "Do you think that you have any chance of winning without taking exorbitant losses?"

The man on the other end laughed, once more sounding as if he was about to slide into hysteria. "I, er, no, Sir. We can still win this, but I... Straw Hat... he's..."

"How many have you lost?" Sengoku murmured, one hand rising to his head but keeping his voice level. *Of fucking course, there's no way Straw Hat wouldn't cause us troubles, above and beyond his Haoshoku. If Akainu had perhaps gone after him himself, this wouldn't be an unmitigated disaster, but as it is...* "Give me a concise report."

"Sir!" the snap of command authority seemed to bring the other man back to himself once more, and he went on, "four of our ships are heavily damaged in various ways, three of whom have been sunk entirely, though the third might still be salvageable. The fourth is in the center of what the locals call the Pirate Cove and badly damaged the enemy ship before it caught fire due to unknown reasons. The locals, they, they seem to have turned against us or are at least prepared to do so. I have seen reports of individuals wearing odd-looking armor attacking our marines as they have tried to circle one of the Straw Hats."

“I know that, but we might be able to talk the locals out of it. Continue.”

“Sir! Our two remaining ships are relatively intact except for their bombard cannons, which have been destroyed. We are currently using one ship as a medical barge. The other is acting as a rescue ship for the crews of the other vessels that sank, while keeping a watch on the entrance to the Pirate’s Cove. Our crews are battered, and while I don’t have exact numbers, I would estimate we are down to barely a fourth of our men still in combat shape. Most were knocked unconscious by a wave of Haoshoku, and while we were prepared for that, we didn’t make enough allowance for it as I said, or the damages being knocked out during a combat operation could entail.”

“In return, we have finally wrecked their ship and killed who knows how many of their crew! Their ship stopped firing when it retreated into the cove, where they tried to move the ship up one of the island’s waterways using some means of propulsion I wasn’t able to make out but none have since been seen escaping the wreck. Their captain is slowly being worn down, but his ability to fight crowds threw off our pre-battle appraisal of his abilities further. We’ve lost commodores and captains, and, and I was forced to retreat from the battle due to my Devil Fruit being next to useless against him. I know at least four of our officers are dead, possibly more. The three remaining vice admirals are still in the fight, though as I said, Dalmatian’s wounds are, they are very, very severe. So severe he needs more medical attention than we can give him.”

“How many of the bounty heads on the crew have you seen?”

“Er...” Very Good paused. “Er... none but their captain, sir. The woman, she has wings on her back for some reason. Um, she has a very odd combat style, using items of some sort from what little I saw. I heard one of the admirals call them dials, but I don’t know what those are. We, er, we haven’t seen anyone else, not even the Devil Child.” Knowing that sounded bad, Very Good went on hastily. “But as I said, the ship was firing full broadsides at first and has since gone silent.”

“I see...” Hearing all this, Admiral Sengoku was faced with a choice.

On the one hand, he could take up Iceburg’s offer and pull back. At this point, with the marines not yet actively firing on the civilians, he could indeed pull back, run with Iceburg’s suggestion, make it seem as if the marines had acted on bad intelligence or whatever, use that and say this whole thing was unauthorized to out it. It would result in some loss of face, and Onigumo, and Akainu, would pay the price for it. But such was their control of the world news and Water 7’s position that it was possible.

He could double down. Sengoku could send in Kizaru to finish the job and then wipe out all of Water 7, so no contradicting reports could leak to the press, then blame it on the Straw Hats. *Are the Straw Hats worth that...* At this point, listening to the damages done to the Buster Call fleet, Sengoku really did think it would be. A pirate crew, or rather, a captain, who could do

so much damage after so short a career was a threat to world peace whom he wanted expunged.

But Sengoku knew the cost would be too high in the long run. *With our confrontation with the Whitebeard Pirates coming up, we need every officer we can get. If we lose more Vice-admirals, especially a few of our strongest, and this time permanently, that will leave a hole in our order of battle. To say nothing of the lower-ranked commodore and captains, we have already lost in this fight.*

Especially when I never even signed off on it!

“Sir?” Very Good asked.

It was with a start that Admiral Sengoku realized in his anger he had said that last aloud that. And that added impetus to his decision. “Pull back.”

“W, what!? Sir, we can still win this!” Very Good began.

In the distance, new cannon fire was heard, and Sengoku frowned, raising a hand to rub his forehead. “Are those cannons our ships or the locals?”

Very Good paused for a moment, then came back. “They just started Sir, er, warning shots from the shore. Sir, more and more of our troops, are waking up from Haoshoku induced unconsciousness! We can...”

“Call it off Very Good!” Admiral Sengoku roared, slamming one fist down on his desk. “Call it off,” he repeated, his tone changing slightly, becoming bitter. “That is an order. This is an unmitigated loss for us, best to pull back, do what we can to save face as well as our people and resources.”

“Sir, I, I will relay that order,” Very Good answered with a sigh.

A sigh of relief, Sengoku was interested to note, despite his earlier words as he hung up that Den Den Mushi. *There comes a time when victory becomes simply too fucking costly to even contemplate fighting. Especially in a fight that should never have happened! Although in the long term, depending on how much of his crew is intact, Garp’s grandson might be meeting with Akainu or Kizaru sooner rather than later. Hells, I’d still send Kizaru out right now if I could get away with it! Lazy bastard is due back soon, and Garp is... Damn you, God, why do you hate me? Still best to get ahead of things there and get him out of here before he learns about what Akainu did. “I will be sending Garp in to help smooth things over and deal with the pirates if they make trouble.”*

With a sigh, he picked up his other Den Den Mushi. “Mayor Iceburg, are you still there?”

“I am. But you have to know...”

“Your people are about to attack my marines. Yes, I know. I’ve already ordered a cease-fire, but I will tell you this formally. This was a mistake, and the Marines will eat a bit of crow, so long as you do not...”

“I’m not going to say anything that will cause trouble for my best customers. That would be a remarkably unprofessional thing to do.” Iceburg interrupted Sengoku in turn, his Den Den Mushi showing a brief grimace. “In fact, I will do one better. The marines will need help with their wounded and everything else. My people will start helping yours, and beyond helping with your wounded, we will repair all your ships so long as they lift the white flag.”

Sengoku bit back a snarl, knowing how much that would hurt the marine’s pride. But if it was the difference between having his marines alive or getting a pittance of them back from a pyrrhic victory, he would take it. “Thank you, Mayor Iceburg. I will get back on the horn with them. I will also be sending Vice-Admiral Garp to take control at the scene.”

OOOOOOO

Luffy’s arm throbbed, and one leg was also too battered to let him use Geppo, cuts and long bruises covering his thigh down to his ankle, and his thigh bone broken in the last strike. Luffy dropped to the ground with a groan to conserve energy as his ki healing went to work, much slower than at the start of the fight. But his other leg was strong enough to let him bounce back from a blow from one of the vice admirals, grabbing at Momonga’s sword, holding it still, and flipping himself up and over, lashing out with a kick.

Strawberry’s blade sliced into Luffy’s side, drawing blood, but he was still sent reeling away from the return blow. However, the few remaining low-ranked officers crowded in, and now, with Luffy nearing exhaustion, they changed from being so many obstacles to actual threats. One nearly cut across Luffy’s forehead in a way that sent blood dribbling into his eyes, but Luffy had enough ki left to heal it quickly even though he couldn’t use Busoshoku any longer for anything but his feet and hands.

Staring at them, Luffy growled, gathering himself to start using his Goro Goro no Mi powers smashing aside a cut from Onigumo, then step in, hurling a blow towards the vice-admiral’s face. And Onigumo, like Momonga, Strawberry and Luffy, were no longer covering themselves with Busoshoku, concentrating on keeping the enhancement surrounding their blades. They didn’t have his endurance and had been pushed hard in the last few minutes since Dalmatian had been dealt with.

All of them twitched to the side as Very Good arrived on the scene, shouting out, “Cease-fire, cease-fire. We’ve been tricked! It wasn’t the Straw Hats that attempted to assassinate Iceburg!”

Narrowing his eyes, Luffy pulled his punch back, glaring at Momonga, who had also stopped moving in midair. Staring at the fist a bare inch away from his face, he slowly pulled away, breathing a sigh of relief. "That was a close one," he muttered.

Looking down, Luffy stared down at where Momonga's offhand held a dagger, ready to thrust forward into Luffy's guts. "You use daggers too?"

At first, Momonga didn't bother replying, simply moving away from Luffy towards Strawberry. While a part of him had gained a grudging respect for Straw Hat's abilities, he couldn't forget that the pirate had probably killed upwards of a hundred marines today, even if the marines were the instigators. *Although now I am wondering if the Fleet Command even authorized this attack in the first place... If all these deaths were for nothing, I... don't know what to think about that.*

But as he reached the other Vice Admiral, he turned back, nodding towards Luffy. "I use everything I have to in order to win Straw Hat and always have a dagger somewhere. Best you remember that."

Ranma snorted, shaking his head. "Sure, and next time I won't pull my punch back."

"No, I'll just slice your hand off," Momonga snorted, and the two of them turned away from one another.

However, Onigumo was furious and waved one of his spider arms at the younger officer, although, Luffy noted, it wasn't one of the ones Luffy had broken during the fight. "What the fuck are you saying, Very Good!? We're winning!"

"I rather doubt you are," a new voice said as Nico Robin walked across the horribly shattered, burning remains of the Pirate's Cove docks they were currently standing in.

Around her, more and more of the locals, both Franky Family and shipwrights, began to appear, following her towards the downed marines and then past them towards the docks, where several small boats were now being pulled out of various warehouses. The locals picked up the two downed officers, putting them on stretchers, while others moved towards the other marines Laki had been fighting throughout the docks.

Behind Robin came Zoro and Lulu, leading a large group of locals. While Zoro, who was basically being carried between two other shipwrights, looked way worse than Luffy knew he did, the other two and the several dozen shipwrights with them looked both angry and very combative. And behind them came the Kairiki Destroyers and several other, nearly as large shipwrights, all of whom were carrying large, multi-barreled cannons.

Seeing them, Onigumo's face shifted from its normal corpse-like gray to red. "Damn you all! If you stand with the Devil child and Straw Hat, we will simply wipe you out as well! For Absolute Justice!"

"Admiral Onigumo! By order of Fleet Admiral Sengoku, this fight is over. It's finished!" Very Good stated, before going on, looking at the locals all the while as he attempted to state the reasons behind the marines being involved in this battle on what could be seen as the wrong side in the eyes of the locals. "Er, we, we fought for the wrong reasons today, we fought the wrong people. This fight wasn't about justice. It, it was about nothing at all." With that, he held out the Den Den Mushi he'd brought with him to the angry man.

Honestly, Luffy was just too exhausted and sore to care about the drama with the marines, and he turned his back on them, moving over to where Laki had joined Robin and Zoro. The Shandian woman's forearm looked almost like it had been painted black and blue up to the elbow thanks to her continued use of the Impact dial. One of her legs was also bleeding badly, although the woman had bandaged herself somehow.

Yet Zoro looked worse. Indeed, he looked as if he'd been through even more of a ringer than Luffy, and he didn't have Luffy's ki healing ability and was only standing thanks to the help of the locals on either side of him. Hmm, we might make ki healing a priority going forward for him. But he knew the other man wouldn't respond well to concern, so instead, Luffy merely said, "You look like shit, Zoro. Can I assume the other guy looks worse? And where's Chopper?"

"Chopper's gathered every other local doctor they have and is setting up a field hospital up that way, outside where we got our yagura bulls. Feh, it's the only reason why the little bastard let me go. He was too busy to notice me ordering these two to help me. As for me, it was 'guys,' plural," Zoro chuckled, the sound a raspy, pain-filled thing. But he still removed an arm from around the shoulders of one of the shipwrights to clasp forearms with his captain, staring hard up at the sword-wielding spider-armed Admiral then around at the others, making a tsking noise when he saw they were all swordsmen. "Looks like you had a party all to yourself right here."

"Hey! What am I, chopped liver?" Laki grumbled, fighting an urge to thump the near-dead-looking Zoro upside the head. *He might break, I'm too fucking tired, and Chopper would kill me if he found out.* She then leaned in, whispering. "Captain, last I saw, the Resolve was still floating up the waterway. Our ship's been mangled. That last battleship hurt her pretty bad. But Resolve was still alive!"

Laki's part in the battle had been extremely topsy-turvy. She had first ridden the ship into the cove, then broken off to try to deal with the one ship which had followed them in, once Luffy was fully engaged with the officers, pushed out of position over the entrance. It had worked. First Laki had caused the ship to crash into the wreckage of one of its sister ships, and then her Impact dial had done something to the interior of the ship to cause it to catch fire,

although Laki had no idea how since she had already turned away at that point, fleeing from the acid user.

But that didn't happen before the ship had mauled the fleeing *Resolve*. At that point, Laki had retreated to the ship for a time, only to see the marines who had come ashore from the other ships. Laki had led them a merry chase through the docks instead of letting them close with their ship.

"Agreed." Luffy nodded sharply. "Thanks to my use of Haoshoku, your gadgets, and Resolve, we were able to survive. At the moment, that's all I wanted." *That, and keeping my Goro Goro powers under wraps. For now.*

"At the moment'?" Zoro echoed, staring at Onigumo, who was arguing with someone on the other side of the Den Den Mushi.

"Yeah. At the moment. But I figure if the World Government keeps on coming after us, well, eventually, I might decide to go after them, somehow," Luffy answered with a scowl. With those of his crew on the island proving to be alive, including Resolve, some of Luffy's concerns and his bloodthirstiness faded. But in his mind, this whole attack was not a good sign.

I knew that Robin's presence would make us enemies, let alone my own abilities, but I didn't think they'd be willing to throw so many resources against us so soon. A Buster Call called down just on us? And we haven't even reached the New World! Still, if the World Government keeps on bringing war to me after this, well, they've had their warnings and I might just respond. Although... my crew isn't nearly as strong as I would like it to be before that point, damn it. We need more time to train.

To one side, Onigumo roared in fury and tossed the Den Den Mushi receiver back to Very Good before turning, hopping away towards the marine vessel in the cove. The revived crewmen there had gotten the fires under control by this point but Luffy didn't doubt those marines were still stunned at how the battle had turned out.

Strawberry and Momonga moved towards the pirates, both of them looking even more tired than they had been a moment before. But before either could speak, Luffy addressed them. "You all have been called off. Someone up the chain of command wasn't happy about you attacking Water 7 like this. You're going to just sweep this under the rug." His tone made that last part a statement rather than a question, though what he thought of it wasn't clear.

"Indeed. Apparently, we were acting on false information. Who knew," Momonga tried to sound amused, but failed, while Strawberry kept on glaring right back at Luffy. Both of them were now very angry at how this day had gone, and while Momonga was willing to admit the marines had been, somewhat, at fault, Strawberry was not.

Luffy snorted but kept right on glaring back at the vice admirals despite most of him wanting to stop the fighting. But there were still missing crewmen to account for. *After all, if we were attacked here and Zoro's group was attacked too, who's to say that Sanji and the girls weren't also attacked?*

"I am glad to hear that my information came through, and you marines responded as promptly as could be possible," declared the newly arrived Iceburg, leaning heavily on Paulie as, behind them, a yagura bull in the nearby waterway wheezed in exhaustion. Along with many of its brethren, the animal had been pressed into service to bring aid down to the cove.

Seeing Luffy's anger and not knowing most of it was feigned, Iceburg hissed out, "You might've been able to win this, but then what would've happened? My island would've been forced to choose to become a pirate-only haven, and here in Paradise, that's not a good idea. Not even a Yonko's word could allow us to keep living as well as we have. Give over, please."

Luffy huffed, but he knew the man had a point, and there was another factor in his favor that was just appearing in the sky above: dark clouds. *If we start fighting again and it then begins to rain...* There was no way Luffy wanted to give away his Ranko secret. That was right up there with his Goro Goro powers, or even above them. "Yeah, okay, whatever. I don't like it, and I seriously don't like how you marines gunned for us here, but... I understand your point, Iceburg. But there's still one thing we need to do before peace can really be declared here.

With that, Luffy turned away, taking one of the crew's Den Den Mushis from Laki. "If Sanji and those with him are alright, then yeah, we can call it quits here. If not... we won't." *I might not have access to Busoshoku for a while, but even so, I know who I'd back in this kind of fight.*

Zoro stiffened but knew that his wounds were too serious to do much if the fighting resumed but willing to try anyway. And nearby Robin, who wasn't anywhere near as wounded as the two men, also looked on, her dark eyes cold and her hands twitching even as her legs reminded her of the abuse they had been put through second hand.

Looking away from the Vice-Admirals and Iceburg, Luffy dialed the appropriate number and spoke into the pickup the instant the other side picked up. "Sanji, Nami, you two all right?" He didn't mention Makino since she didn't have a bounty poster yet and he wanted to keep it that way.

For a moment, no one answered, and the tension ratcheted higher as more and more marine officers moved to back up the three vice-admirals, and Luffy's eyes darkened as he glared at Onigumo. This left Iceburg and a few of his shipwrights standing to one side of the group, a very weak, very alone thin red line now **very** worried they would have to try to keep the two sides apart through force, knowing they didn't have enough power to do it.

Then Nami's voice came in, breathless and exhausted, but she didn't sound as if she was in too much pain. "We're all alright, captain. It was a close thing, and I don't think that Iceburg will be very happy with the damages to the searain, but we're all okay."

For a moment, Luffy's face remained locked, but then he shook himself, and his entire posture relaxed. A wry, rueful smile appeared on his face, and he even assayed a chuckle. "Heh, ah, so that, that other pirate crew attacked you as well, huh?"

"Other pirate crew? Well, yeah, I suppose there could be a crew that goes around wearing full suits and such," Nami drawled back.

"There actually is one such," Iceburg said, looking over at the Marines. "The Capone Gang. Come to think of it, we, that is my Galley-La company, built them a new ship barely two weeks ago."

Momonga tugged at his mustache thoughtfully, then nodded decisively. *That will do. They have already been making a name for themselves with pillaging and dubious tricks. And then we can go after them in the meantime.* "Indeed, that makes everything much clearer. Capone is known for underhanded tricks, and creating this sort of disaster behind them could be used for many different goals. We will have to put a great effort into hunting them down now."

"Yes, that crew," Luffy answered before relaying the name to Nami. "The Capone Gang. Any of them mention the name?" he asked, hoping Nami would catch on. Knowing all his crew were safe, Luffy had no desire to continue this fight now.

Having heard Iceburg and Momonga and Luffy's words, Nami understood what was being said and what wasn't and ran with it. "Ah, yeah, one of them, a guy with an unfortunate overbite and mousy features, said he was an officer in the Capone Gang. I gotta say though, captain, though this is going to be an interesting talk when we get back, captain."

"Oh, like you wouldn't believe," Luffy muttered. "Like you wouldn't believe!"

Momonga then looked at Iceburg, while Strawberry calmed down, also looking at the local mayor. "And you will keep your... suppositions to yourself? And keep aiding our marines?" The wounded and dead were still being moved from the ships and shipwrights were even now racing about trying to save those ships.

"I will," Iceburg answered firmly.

"Good," Luffy muttered, his attitude having mellowed considerably towards the common marines now that they weren't attacking him and his crew were all okay, a part of him feeling guilty about the number of deaths among the sheep he'd probably caused. "I'd wager

our doctor is going to be happy to help. Heh, I'd probably have to tie him down to keep him from offering. And er, Robin's always, handy."

Everyone there groaned at the pun while Robin conjured up a hand with the express purpose of dope slapping Luffy. But despite that moment of levity, Strawberry kept glaring at Luffy, making the former martial artist realize this guy would probably be an enemy for life. "Agreed. I would suggest that you all skip town quickly. Apparently, Vice Admiral Garp is being sent to take command here. Whatever the reasons behind our out-of-control assault on Water 7, you are, after all still pirates and could be dealt with accordingly."

"Seriously!?" Luffy whipped around from where he had been walking away, staring at the man in horror, his face turning white, while his crew began to stare in various stages of shock. "Really!?! Oh God, oh God!"

All of the Marine officers nearby smirked at his sudden terror, and then it was their turn to be stunned into slack-faced astonishment as Luffy went on. "Oh my God, oh my God, my Gramps is going to kill me!"

"Gramps!?" many of the Marines there shouted, including the two vice-admirals, Strawberry's jaw having fallen so far it was hilarious to see.

Luffy blinked, staring at them all, cocking his head to one side. "What, none of you were told?"

OOOOOOO

Actually, at that point, Garp was not thinking about punching his grandson. After all, Luffy had been attacked by the marines, not the other way around and he knew Luffy well enough to know he wouldn't go looking for a fight. Not like this one, anyway. Heck, he knew his grandson well enough to know that Luffy would try to keep the deaths on both sides to a minimum even under these circumstances.

No, his violent tendencies have a completely different target. "I'm going to kill him," Garp growled, cracking his knuckles explosively. The sounds his knuckles made were entirely too much like someone smashing a building into pieces for Admiral Sengoku's frame of mind.

"You can't do that, Garp. Akainu is too important to the Marines to..."

"I'mma do it!" Garp growled out, standing up.

Watching Garp do so gave Sengoku the impression that a mountain would, when it decides that, yes, it's avalanche season. His mind liked to create such visual allusions when he was stressed. And oh boy, was Sengoku stressed now. "Garp! Your grandson has already done enough damage to the Marines with this action, don't make it worse."

Garp growled at that but nodded. "You're right. Your other bit of idiocy is coming up, so we can't afford to fritter away our combat power anymore. Have I mentioned how this whole executing Ace thing is a bad fucking idea today?"

"No, not today, but since you did it five times yesterday, I think you're at your quota," Sengoku growled. "And you're not to tell Straw Hat about that either. I know you'll let him go thanks to your family connection, although I at least expect you to make it look good." Sengoku glared at Garp, who scowled but nodded eventually. "If Straw Hat finds out, when it's announced in the news, fine. By then, it will probably be too late. But I don't want him involved in this whole Ace business. He's too much of a wild card for me to be able to predict his impact on it."

Garp snorted, shaking his head. "Like saying, the ocean is wet, that. Still, I'll go along with things. For now." Growling imprecations against Akainu under his breath, Garp stomped off, slamming the door to his office so hard, the poor door collapsed into splinters.

Thankfully for Akainu, he wasn't on Marineford at the moment. Instead, he was at the prison complex Impel Down, the World Government's most secure, most protected and most secret prison. He was there to speak to the guards and make certain that Ace would be ready for transportation to his trial when the time was right. Until then, they had to leave him there, hidden away. Nowhere else was out of Whitebeard's reach.

Sighing, Sengoku leaned back in his chair, having come down to Garp's office to speak to him about this matter. *Still, Garp will be able to apologize and get the people of Water 7 to believe the party line, bar Iceburg and his foremen. Kizaru wouldn't have the presence, and Aokiji wouldn't bother, simply saying sorry and then leaving, the bastards! And Akainu... you fucking fool,* Sengoku grumbled, thinking about the most hotheaded, pun intended, of the three logia users.

Using a Buster Call on Water 7 was never in the cards. Even the World Government wouldn't okay that. It would be far too much like killing the goose who laid the golden egg. Their ships were so good that even shipwrights in the New World, few of whom were under the control of the World Government or willing to work with them, struggled to match their designs. The government's various clandestine units especially made use of them. But Akainu couldn't see past his anger at Water 7's past or their present willingness to work with pirates, seeing it simply as a place to pin and break the Straw Hats.

Still, I think we can use this incident. Once the Straw Hats are gone, we can move in, flood the island with money to pay for repairs, gain back some goodwill. And... and this Franky fellow who was with Black Leg Sanji and Cat Burglar Nami, if the reports the government agents passed on are accurate, we can do something about him as well. I just hope that the dead among our mid-tier fighters isn't as high as Very Good indicated.

Thinking about all this kept Sengoku's mind busy as he sat there until a marine came in and saluted. "Sir, Vice Admiral Garp's ship has left for Enies Lobby."

"Good. Good." With that, Sengoku stood up and left Garp's office, moving to close the door and sighing before ordering the marine to find an orderly to repair it, before his mind moved back to the man who had broken the door. *He's already angry enough about this whole business. I can't let him get involved further. Best to make certain he doesn't have any hint as to what else I will be doing here.* Because Garp had been correct. They couldn't afford any more losses to the marine firepower.

But they also had to stop this Monkey D. fellow. They had to. After all, regardless of how stupidly it had been utilized, the young pirate had just almost single-handedly wrecked a Buster Call. *Damn Akainu! He never thought about how badly this could go. Even if we won, with Fire Fist's execution coming up, any loss in our firepower is a big deal.*

He moved through the base to Chief Staff Officer Tsuru's room, knocking politely and entering quickly when she gave permission. "What brings you to my abode?" Tsuru growled out, not looking up from a stack of books.

They weren't the normal budget or logistics books that she would normally be looking over. These looked more like history books. "Still looking into the strange powers Garp's grandson exhibited?"

"Trying and failing," Tsuru snorted, looking up from her work. "There are a few hints of something, some other kind of Haki, older and more primal somehow, I'm not certain what to make of it being called that. But there's next to nothing about what it could do. Now, what do you need?"

"Help with fixing a problem and deciding how to move against Straw Hat. You said you had a plan. I hope it doesn't involve the marine's forces, because let me tell you, we just took a hit we could ill-afford because of Akainu's idiocy," Sengoku grumbled. From there, he explained what he had so far learned about the disaster at Water 7.

Tsuru listened, becoming more and more livid as the tale went on, but she said nothing until he finished, shaking her head with a sigh. "You realize, Sakazuki needs to be bumped down a grade for this."

"Yes, he will be, and then I'll send him after some of the other super rookies in Paradise, including the one we will be blaming for this disaster. The World Government will like that, and it will be a punishment too, until we call him back for Ace's execution. But that doesn't mean that he was entirely wrong," Sengoku grumbled. "Straw Hat Luffy and the rest of his crew are becoming more dangerous and they already make any of the other rookies look weak in comparison. The last thing we need is the rise of another powerful pirate force."

“Hmmm.... I do have an idea there, although I will wait to see Dalmatian and Momonga’s reports. They are the best observers among those four. Still, yes, we can stop him, stop him cold, I think. So long as you realize that we might lose one or more Shichibukai if it goes wrong. Moria is operating near Water 7 somewhere. We could reinforce him. Straw Hat could withstand four Vice-Admirals. But three Shichibukai?” Tsuru smiled thinly. “That is a different idea entirely.”

“Who?” Sengoku asked. “Only Kuma really follows our orders like that, after all. And we were assuming we would have the Shichibukai’s strength to call upon when Whitebeard comes for Fire Fist.”

“Perhaps, but we have a few weeks before we announce we have Fire Fist to let the Pacifista Project build up its numbers. And the Shichibukai are hard to control at the best of times. There are a few I could pressure to support Moria. The little Gecko himself would be the main issue, but we can push him too, if we’re careful about it and bring him gifts,” Tsuru’s lips twisted at that, both at the need to do so and the kind of gifts that would be necessary for that.

“Tell me more.”

When the woman told him, who else she would bring in to help overwhelm the Straw Hats, at first, Garp was disbelieving. But as the plan unfolded, he nodded, more and more enthusiastic. “Yes, yes! That will work!”

“Of course it will. It’s one of my plans. Now, get a ship ready, and put Hina in charge of it. I’d prefer Gion, but we have to head out soon to set this up appropriately.”

“I’ll do so, and then, I’ll get with the photographers and the bounty poster people. Despite the cover-up, there’s going to be some big changes coming for all of the Straw Hat’s bounties after this.”

OOOOOO

Unaware of the tides turning against them elsewhere once more, Luffy had retreated to the Resolve, checking in with the last member of his crew currently present. Resolve was bloody and battered, but the Klabautermann had been able to remove its spirit from the areas struck by enemy fire enough times to come out of it with her spiritual self as intact as could be expected. Then too, Klabautermann didn’t die from simple wounds. They had to be sunk to truly die and the Resolve hadn’t sunk. It was listing badly, even in the stream of the waterway that the ship had retreated into but it hadn’t sunk.

The Franky Family were already preparing a few ropes and their giant yagura bulls to tow it away to a drydock. The other locals had no idea why they were going to that trouble, but the Franky Family had been given their marching orders by Luffy and none had complained.

Zoro had already been moved there, his wounds finally causing him to slip into unconsciousness. Chopper was still busy with his emergency hospital, with Robin lending hands wherever they were needed, they were being guarded by Lulu and Paulie who both knew that if the marines succeeded in any last-minute trick, Luffy would break them in half.

He had literally told them that before heading over to the ship, after getting over his anger at the damage done to Chopper's eye. That had nearly caused him to restart the battle, but Chopper had talked him out of it and the Zoan's cheerful good humor had caused Luffy's anger to fade away once more.

Laki was there too, but given the injuries her arm had taken, he doubted she would be very useful.

"Not that the marines are really in any shape to restart things," Luffy whispered to Resolve as the Klabautermann handed him a handful of nails, which Luffy used to patch one of the many holes in the ship's side. No one else was there, Luffy having ordered them all away to bury a few 'bodies' made of the bedding and other things Luffy could contrive out to sea, an idea Robin had come up with before Luffy had left her with Chopper. In doing so, he had made it clear he didn't want people to see what the ship still held in its hold. "We beat them, Resolve. This was a total victory for us and a lot of it was because of you."

"Hehe, it's not every frigate, which can boast of beating a battleship, let alone six," the Klabautermann grinned behind a battered, swollen face. "But they are still staying here?"

"They've got too many wounded to house in their two ships and not enough medical supplies. Heh, I wonder how they'll deal with the crisis of faith that having so many of their lives saved by Chopper is going to cause."

While he'd seen to the locals first, Chopper hadn't turned away the marines as they began to be brought to his field hospital. He and Robin were even now saving marines wounded in the battle in various ways, and the last time he had seen them, none of the three Vice-admirals had seemed to know what to make of that.

"What's going to happen now, Captain?"

Luffy shrugged. "Our reason for being here hasn't changed, Ressay." He ignored the little spirit's fist impacting his side and the accompanying growl of, 'Don't call me that.' "We still want to build you a new body. This battle just means we might have an easier time of it. That, and maybe getting a new crewman. We won't be leaving whatever my Gramps wants before those things happen."

"You want Franky in the crew, don't you?" Resolve guessed shrewdly.

“Yep. The seatrain should be back in a few hours, although the locals have said something about a storm coming, which will mean all ships and seatrains will be shut down soon. Regardless, I’d be willing to wager that the marines’ reaction to what happened here is going to help our, heh, recruitment pitch a bit,” Luffy chuckled, shaking his head. “Beyond that, we’ll just have to see.”

Luffy brightened up, patting Resolve on the shoulder as he turned to head up to the main deck. It was almost time for the seatrain to arrive. “And hey, this time it looks as if Mother Nature cooperated, bringing the rain only after we’re done fighting, so I don’t need to deal with my curse and all its complications and shit. With that, and all of us still alive I’ll count my blessings. Even with Gramps on the way.” At that his expression dimmed. “So not looking forward to that, ugh.”

Resolve’s laughter followed Luffy out of the hold as he made his way back up onto the main deck, while above, clouds continued to gather, blocking out the stars above.

End Chapter

Oooof. Hope you all liked this monster of a chapter. While almost all the fights were generally happening at the same time, and thus I wanted to have them all in the same chapter, this was really hard! I don’t think I’ll ever write up another chapter for this work that is this size again.