

Hey all! Here is the next chapter of *Stallion of the Line!* Normally this would have been updated by the end of the month, but I wanted to give **Tomon** time to go over it when he said he couldn't get it back to me in time. Alas, he has yet to do so, and I promised to get it out to you by the Super Bowl. He gave me a lot of insight but didn't get the full chapter back to me. Still, **Hiryo** has looked it over, given me his thoughts, and I released it earlier... elsewhere... LOL, and took today to go over it and make changes based on their observations. I also used Grammarly, so there shouldn't be too many small mistakes that will break your immersion.

Chapter 32: Lightning Strikes

Panic and fear were not emotions Boa Hancock could look on with any fondness. She had not felt any of them in years, but one did not forget the kind of mind-numbing terror Boa Hancock had felt all too often as a slave. Perhaps the hopelessness of those years was why, for all that panic should be flowing into her being, Boa was not giving into it. Boa had seen the worst life could throw at her, and suddenly fighting a logia user whose power was one of the few, which could boast of being unbeatable, wasn't up to the level of being chained and branded, knowing the horror to come would make the pain of that even worse.

Because I can fight back now, Boa thought grimly, as Busoshoku covered her from head to toe and she cracked her knuckles. Breathing in deeply as she prepared for the assault that was certain to come. And besides those rumors about the Goro Goro No Mi being unbeatable are just that, rumors. Time to see if there is any substance to them.

Yet even as she readied herself for Luffy's assault, Boa could only shake her head as it all came together than in her mind. The way Luffy had transformed and shattered Boa's partial attempts to freeze him in place via her Mero Mero powers. The way he had seemed so confident. *He was toying with us!*

Kuma's thoughts lacked any panic or shock. Indeed, Kuma didn't know if he could feel those kinds of emotions at all. That kind of thing involved glands, and Kuma didn't know if Vegapunk had left him any. Still, he too was astonished to see Monkey D. Luffy turning into lightning.

The lightning fruit, one of a few logia fruits, which can truly boast of being practically unbeatable, Kuma thought before listing off the information he knew about it. The ability to control lightning, not only to call it down from on high but to turn yourself into lightning. This might extend to sensing the synapses of people's brains around you, giving the user to perhaps know what they were doing, perhaps even thinking. The ability to travel as fast as lightning, akin to teleportation almost but not quite. Like every other Logia, any use is easy, much like throwing a punch.

A part of Kuma, a very deep, secretly buried part of him that was still fanatically loyal to the Revolutionary Army, was actually quite pleased. The son of the Monkey D. Dragon having the Goro Goro No Mi? That was amazing. And yet, it certainly wasn't going to help him at the

moment. Kuma knew it. But unlike the other two, he had options. *I need to escape as soon as I can. The World Government will excuse my retreat if I tell the Elders about this.*

For his part, Moria did feel panic, and unlike Boa, he wasn't dealing with it at all well, since he had already felt the new power Luffy was bringing to the fight. **FUUUUUUCK!!** *Even with more than a hundred Shadows strengthening my body, that hurt.* Worse, Moria saw that his shadow was only slowly reforming, and doing so was somehow causing Moria pain, a pain in his head rather than his body. *Of all the Devil Fruits, the bastard has to have one that's anathema to mine! The only one worse would have been the Light fruit.*

"W, we have to work together here!" he shouted to the other two, even as Luffy finished his transformation, and lashed out, blindingly fast, almost literally. A bolt of lightning the width of a tree trunk flashed towards Gecko, and he ducked to one side, rolling through the ground and then leaping up over a second strike as if his life depended on it, showing a remarkably fast turn of speed for someone built as he was.

Hancock didn't reply verbally but instead charged, her body now covered with Busoshoku from head to toe. *The time to husband my strength is past now. It's all or nothing!*

Kuma did not reply either. Instead, he charged forward as well. Or rather, limped forward. Kuma's leg obviously wasn't up to doing more than acting as a crutch, stuck in one position, unable to bend or twist. Because of that, Luffy instantly noticed he was keeping to the ground. He also seemed to want to get in close to use his power directly on Luffy. *If I can perhaps send his entire self away, then he might not be able to reform. I have not ever tested my powers on energy-type logias before.*

As he charged, Kuma threw out a series of air blasts towards Luffy, which disrupted a few of the attacks coming his way. The lightning bolts Luffy threw his way were diverted from their straight-line course by the condensed air blasts as they struck.

But by the time Kuma closed, Luffy was gone from where he had been standing. He was now behind Kuma, flickering into being there faster than even Boa could track, thrusting a fist formed out of lightning thrust forward as he shouted out, "Blazing Crusher."

Kuma thrust one hand quickly behind him, catching the attack and diverting it with his paw. Even an energy logia-type assault could be reflected by the Nikyu Nikyu fruit, which meant that, if Kuma had been in peak fighting condition, he might well have been the one to fare best against Luffy.

Luffy dodged around a series of air blasts before letting a few of them go through him, his form dissipating to reappear with a crackle of lightning in the air above the trio. *Time to up the ante again. "Lightning Barrage!"*

From the air above Luffy, more than a hundred lightning bolts crashed down towards the three Shichibukai. Kuma used his power very effectively to bounce the blasts coming at him. Boa too used her powers, and Luffy was surprised to see that her Pistol kiss attack was able to disrupt his lightning strikes, the two energy attacks cancelling one another out.

Moria cried out as several of those strikes hit him, but even as they did, he was reaching outward with his power. Elsewhere in the shattered remnants of the forest, human-shaped shadows sped towards Moria, called from the shattered remnants of the various zombies the Straw Hats had taken out of action.

With the energy of these shadows within Moria, his own shadow reformed after a second and then began to reach out, grabbing at the shadows of trees and bits of rubble, munching on them as if they were solid food. It was almost as if eating other shadows gave it power as it had earlier when Luffy had dissipated it with his ki attacks. Meanwhile, the humanoid shadows fused with Moria gave his body enough durability to handle the next few lightning blasts that struck him.

However, Luffy could see that trick had a limit. Each time a bolt of lightning struck the Shichibukai, he could see Shadows leaving his body. *Although it looks to be less each time? Huh. Maybe he will gain enough durability to tank my lightning shots if he recalls enough of the shadows? Still, he has to survive until then, so...*

A moment later, Moria teleported to where his shadow was. As Luffy sent aimed bolts of lightning towards him, Moria kept doing it, shifting his shadow around as fast as he could to avoid the hail of lightning from on high.

I'll have to keep eating my shadows each time he strikes me! Dammit, I need Oz! With that zombie under my control, even lightning like this could... "Graaah!!" His thoughts cut off as he was struck by another lightning blast, but Moria kept moving, teleporting into his shadow once more.

Despite that, Luffy could see that the other two Shichibukai could deal with the smaller lightning bolts, despite the sheer number he was sending at them. *Time to take an attack from Enel's school then.* With barely a thought, Luffy created an attack made to look like a bird of prey constructed out of lightning, several dozen times the size of the previous attacks he had used. "Hino!" he shouted, then even as the attack struck the ground, he flashed away.

The massive ball of lightning wasn't launched directly at the Shichibukai, which meant that Kuma couldn't bounce it away. Instead, it struck the ground in between them, sending the Shichibukai dodging in different directions, ending any attempt the trio might have made to work together. He didn't think they would have been able to effectively, but this way, they were too far apart to come to one another's defense. *Kuma and Hancock can still try to support one another with attacks but not in defense.*

With that, Luffy shouted, "Lightning Bounce!" With that, Luffy used his lightning fruit to zoom from place to place over the battlefield, launching attacks blasting from every direction. To the trio of Shichibukai, it was almost as if Luffy had suddenly created clones of himself that could also attack, but that was a move Luffy hadn't quite mastered. Instead, this was simply speed. All the while, lightning continued to rain down from on high, creating a vast network of lightning strikes.

However, with light, or in this case, lightning, there were always shadows. This let Moria dodge most of the attacks that came his way.

Conversely, Boa and Kuma took up positions and didn't move. Boa used her powers to disrupt the lightning bolts coming her way, using Busoshoku to tank any of blasts that Luffy got through her Kiss Pistol defense. But while on the surface this worked, underneath, Boa had to hide a wince, having just run into a similar problem that, ironically, Luffy had run into fighting Enel.

By Davy Jones' hairy, boil-covered ass, that took it out of me. Unlike a physical strike of any sort, lightning didn't just end when it hit the victim, instead it communicated the electricity of the strike into the interior of their body. And, while Boa was good enough with Busoshoku to harden her entire body, it still stung, and drained her reserves. *A single strike is alright but if I get caught in a large blast it will drain me far more.*

For his part, Kuma whirled like a top, his hands flickering in every direction, his Nikyu Nikyu fruit bouncing back or creating shields of pressurized air to absorb or redirect Luffy's assault. None of the air pressure creations he used, which varied from large balls to paw-shaped shields, couldn't take more than two bolts of lightning.

A second too slow to replace one such cost Kuma, and a blast of lightning struck Kuma in the side. The largest of Luffy's opponents staggered, sizzling as his whole body stiffened. His eyes glowed, and there was a 'phweeeet' sound from him as something within Kuma tried to absorb the electricity so abruptly introduced to his system.

He wasn't overloaded by the blast, but his whole body locked up like his leg for a brief second. Luffy instantly moved to take advantage, appearing in front of the Shichibukai, a massive bolt of lightning reforming in his hands, aiming for Kuma's back, where he thought the sound was coming from. "Let's see if you can absorb this!"

But before he could launch his attack, Hancock attacked Luffy at that point, a shout of "Slave Arrow!" sending a dozen arrows towards Luffy.

They mostly went through Luffy, but this was the first time in the fight Luffy was struck by Boa's attacks since he had begun to use his lightning powers. For some reason, the energy of Mero Mero made into her Slave Arrows did sting a bit. Luffy wasn't certain why but much like

Boa's ability to disrupt his attacks, put it down to two types of energy interacting that really shouldn't and the 'pain' being how his brain dealt with whatever was going on.

Regardless, the interruption allowed Kuma to turn. His white eyes seemed to now blazing as steam erupted from his ears. He opened his mouth, and from within, a laser blasted out, washing over Luffy, wiping out Luffy's body bar a hand that was outside its range, going on to bore a long furrow through the ground.

But from that hand, Luffy reformed, shaking his head a bit. *Okay, that hurt!* That was the first time Luffy had ever lost his lightning body like that to a foreign attack. Unlike when faced with a physical attack – like Sanji's boots or Zoro's swords or even a heat-dial-based plasma beam – Luffy's whole body had been hit, the lightning of his body dissipating. But at the same time, Luffy's higher mental functions hadn't disappeared. Reforming had taken but a thought but the hit had hurt.

Energy versus energy is not fun, got it. Still, I bet if I had responded and fought back by creating my own lightning, it wouldn't have hurt. I guess I still have a lot to learn about logia combat.

Even as he thought that, Luffy zipped away, dodging an attack from Moria's shadow. "Really?" he drawled, then blinked as Moria's real fist came out of a shadow behind a rock nearby darting through Luffy's lightning form. "Okay, that was better, but at the same time not," he quipped, as he funneled still more lightning through the already spasming Moria, seeing shadows leaving his body one after another.

A second later, he was gone, bursting away in a flare of lightning, avoiding Boa's Busoshoku-assisted flying kick. "Damn it! I thought we had him!"

"Almost," Luffy answered, then seeing another laser blast coming towards him, responded by thrusting his hand forward. "Counter Thrust!" *I have to come up with better names for these attacks,* He mused. But most of Luffy's attention was on lashing out against the energy blast from Kuma.

While Kuma was pumping the energy, he had somehow absorbed from Luffy's previous attack into his laser beam, Luffy created the lightning himself. Luffy's energy was inexhaustible, while Kuma's was not. A few seconds and the laser was overwhelmed, its light being pressed back towards the Shichibukai. The Shichibukai's attack cut off, and he bounced away using his paws, his body moving noticeably slower than before, sparks still coming off his cyborg body from Luffy's previous attack, as it tried to expend the energy.

Hancock charged once more, while Moria made no such effort. His initial charge to take part in the battle at all was to put himself near the edge of the battle and create the impression of hopelessness. He had done that, and now Moria retreated away from the combat entirely, calling for still more shadows.

Damn it, I've already used six hundred shadows, and I just lost something like a hundred of them in that one attack. But, but if I call several thousand, perhaps my endurance and strength will let me fight a logia type! But... but no, I need to get out of here. That's just madness. What I need is Oz! His durability, plus my stuffing him with even more shadows, and I might be able to fight a logia user.

Charging behind a double-handed array of Slave Arrows, Hancock didn't notice Moria fleeing anymore, nor did Luffy or Kuma. A second later, Boa got within hand-to-hand range, snarling in fury. "You arrogant asshole, why in the depths of all the oceans were you holding back!?"

Normally, fury ain't a good look for a woman. How the hell does she still look gorgeous? Luffy thought even as he dodged a point-blank Mero Mero beam, followed by dodging a Busoshoku punch and series of kicks and then letting several Slave Arrows through his lightning form before his hands turned normal and he started to strike back, his arms covered by Busoshoku up to the elbow. "Heh, well, that depends on what you mean. As for fighting you, well, would ya believe I didn't want to use it?"

"What!? Why!? And... wait, what?" Boa was confused, and her defense faltered. Instantly, a punch caught her on her chin, sending her sideways. She still twisted around, using the momentum to flow into a kick that forced Luffy to block it as Boa performed a handstand.

Fighting back a blush at the view of the tiny black panties Boa 'wore,' it didn't really cover enough to be worth that, Luffy ducked backward out from another series of kicks. *Crap, she's good.*

Still, coming from the only one of the three Shichibukai whose skill and ability Luffy had come to respect, Boa's question demanded an answer. *And she just gave me a hell of a view, too.* "Before I arrived here on Thriller Bark, I didn't want more trouble coming for my crew. You know how the WeeGee would react if they knew I was also a logia user. They would have sent all three admirals after us, plus a Buster Call, to keep a logia like mine out of pirate hands. My crew couldn't have survived that."

He and Boa split apart to dodge an air pressure attack from Kuma, who looked to be getting more of his movement back as the charge he'd been using from Luffy's attack finally bled off. Then they both leaped up over another dozen Pad Hos. "Then too," Luffy continued, even as he sent back a lightning blast towards Kuma, "I hadn't wanted to kill those Marines, well, the majority anyway. Just their officers."

"And here!?" Boa grunted, not disinterested in Luffy's thinking but also not caring overmuch on why he had concealed his Logia fruit up to this point. "What maggoty-brained idea let you think you could beat us without using it!?"

“It was always a resource I could call on, but after Moria retreated to let his shadow do all the fighting, I felt I had a better than average chance of at least pummeling you both so I could use the lightning to finish you off quickly. After all, my concerns about letting people know still exist, so only using my power when I knew I could make certain news of it wouldn’t get out was just good tactics.”

Of course, there was also another aspect to why Luffy refused to use his lightning powers unless he had to. *After all, how can I become stronger if I just overwhelm my opponents?* Like his crew, Luffy needed to train, become stronger, and challenge other people. Using his logia powers all the time would only help Luffy grow with that power, not in his own skill or in his use of Haki.

Luffy grunted as a Busoshoku fist crashed into his chest, causing him pain even in his logia form. Yet even as he stumbled back, Luffy’s foot came up in a straight kick that caught Boa in the stomach, sending her backward. “And after fighting you...” Luffy broke off, shaking his head as Kuma interfered.

But Boa understood what went unsaid and allowed a faint smile to appear on her face, watching as Luffy disappeared from in front of her, letting a series of Kuma’s attacks through where he had been standing. *So at least Luffy really is as much a combat junky as he seemed, and I seem to have won his respect. Well, fair enough, he did the same.*

But I cannot just give up! My pride will not allow it, Boa thought. With that, she spun in place, kissing her hands as a wide pink sphere appeared all around her. “Slave Artillery!” From around Boa, a literal army’s worth of Slave Arrows appeared, shooting up into the sky.

Luffy saw them coming and replied with several large-scale lightning blasts, covering the sky in it, wiping out Boa’s attack. It was evident that lightning trumped her own Mero Mero powers. The next second still more lightning blasts rocketed down towards Boa and Kuma both, disrupting Kuma’s attack in turn.

Still, I can disrupt his own lightning strikes on me, Boa reflected, using Pistol Kiss defensively thankfully dropping her Haki to let her reserves rest, twirling like a top as she fired out Pistol Kisses in every direction that the lightning strikes came from. *And thank the gods that it looks like he can’t concentrate on using his logia powers and Kenbunshoku at the same time. If he could also anticipate my defense, this would go quickly from bad to unassailably horrible. In that case, I would have no choice but to try to surrender in return for my life... although, why does that not horrify me as much as it should?*

Perhaps because, a small part of Boa’s mind guessed, *you know somehow you can trust Luffy to not take advantage of your weakness. And not just because you would agree to release Nico Robin from her stony internment. What does it say about this whole operation that you believe you can trust your opponent over your allies?*

As Boa had a mild existential moment, she dealt with Luffy's attacks. Unlike the Goro Goro Devil Fruit's previous owner, Luffy preferred smaller, more condensed attacks, but occasionally he launched larger ones, forcing Boa to use her Busoshoku form to defend herself instead of her Pistol kiss attack.

Yet, while Boa was dealing with being put on the back foot and not really having an answer for Luffy's Logia power with some aplomb, Kuma was not doing nearly as well at this point. Kuma's hands flickered desperately as he blocked and blocked and redirected. He used his Nikyu powers to also shift position almost as fast as Luffy could, 'reflecting' himself short distances to launch attacks from his new position. But he could barely get any air attacks off between strikes. And any large-scale attack was impossible.

Thankfully, his Devil Fruit had proven that it could defend him against even Luffy's larger lightning strike. More than once, Kuma bounced massive balls of lightning away to explode crash harmlessly elsewhere in the forest, starting a massive fire almost equal to that of the one that his own Luffy's shock had created earlier, further ravaging the forest.

About half of the forest had been destroyed utterly by this point, with the new fires slowly spreading around the main mast-keep. This was causing all the zombies within to flee just as fast as the surviving survivors of Moria's depredations on the ocean, and more than once, the groups found themselves running side-by-side.

Back in the fight, Luffy had noticed Kuma was beginning to flag, his leg slowing him down tremendously. *If he was moving better, Kuma could probably do this all night. And what few attacks get through are being absorbed by something in his cyborg body, just like that first one. But it's obvious that can be overcome, and...* Luffy disappeared from his former position mid-thought, reappearing right next to Kuma. *I've already seen he's way too slow to keep up with me.*

Kuma desperately tried to turn, bringing his paw up and around. But it went through Luffy's lightning form, blasting some of it away, only for that to apparently have been an after image. The real Luffy had taken a single step back out of his paws range as it twisted around and now reached forward, grabbing at Kuma's outstretched forearm. "Let's see how specific parts of your body do with a more pinpoint attack. Ten thousand volts, Vari!"

For the first time in a long while, Kuma was thankful that part of the process of turning him into a cyborg had removed so many of his pain receptors. Even so, he grunted around clenched teeth as the arc of electricity between Luffy's fingers flowed through his arm, sizzling and frying the synth skin from his arm up to his chest. This revealed Kuma as more cyborg than human, from his arm to his chest, which had already been blasted open in many places thanks to Sanji.

As Boa charged in, Luffy leaped away, and Kuma staggered, his one good leg bending as the other nearly went out from under him. But Boa's Slave Arrows didn't stop Luffy's follow-on

attack. "Lightning Flash!" Luffy intoned, sending out lightning from his hands in either direction. One bolt crashed into Boa, causing her to cry out, having caught her before she could protect herself.

Desperately, Kuma used the accumulated energy Luffy had blasted into his system and lashed out with his laser breath attack again. This caused Luffy's eyes to widen, and he quickly shot away. But this laser beam wasn't the concentrated assault from before. This was a wide-angle beam, which tore away at Luffy's form once more, despite his dodge, as it did his attack where it had been going towards Kuma.

Kuma noticed that the fight had brought them around from one point on the island's circle to near the aft portion of *Thriller Bark*. Out there, the Straw Hats ship could be vaguely seen through the fog, as well as the open ocean beyond. That sight and his current dire straits made Kuma remember his earlier plan to flee, which he acted on immediately. *I have fought to the best of my skills. The World government will forgive me once I tell them about Straw Hat's logia power.*

By the time Luffy reformed, Kuma was in the air and was flashing away, retreating entirely.

For a moment, Luffy watched, reaching out with his Kenbunshoku, and it became very clear that Kuma was retreating entirely. He wasn't just moving to another portion of *Thriller Bark*. No, he was fleeing with his tail between his legs out and away over the ocean. He had already passed the shape of the *Everlasting Resolve*, a sight Luffy was pleased to see even though he could only sense Eve's presence within.

But regardless of his happiness at seeing his crew's youngest seeming member awake and kicking, Luffy glared after Kuma, then shook his head. "No, no way, that's not gonna happen." He looked over to where Hancock was slowly standing up, grimacing from where Luffy's last strike had gotten through her defenses, her Busoshoku failing away. A quick glance around, though, showed no sign of Moria. And Kuma was moving so fast that Luffy barely had a second to realize that if Luffy didn't move quickly, the guy might well get beyond his Kenbunshoku zone. *And if he does that, he might be able to throw off any attempt to catch up. And with him goes the secret of my logia powers...*

"Damn it!" Luffy roared and then took to the air, bouncing after Kuma as he thought his way through this decision. He could sense Moria was fleeing towards where Luffy could feel none of his crew were for some reason, and Hancock wasn't the type to take prisoners. *But I gotta make sure that no one gets away from here with the news that I can use lightning. Not until my crew's ready for the danger that secret will bring them.*

So Luffy flashed after Kuma, literally as fast as lightning, using a mixture of Soru and Geppo to catch up to the Shichibukai.

Behind him, Boa glared after Luffy, then snorted. “Well, I can see his priorities. As for me...” for a moment, Boa scowled, thinking about what she should do right now. A brief rest sounded nice and would let her regain some of her Haki reserves, but when it came to fighting Luffy, she knew that there was little she could do if he just kept his distance from her.

For just a moment, Hancock looked toward where the keep was, or rather, toward the collapsed mausoleum that was part of the cemetery which led to the mansion on one side. That was where Luffy had hidden Nico Robin’s statue. *I might have been the only one to notice that before he moved the battle away from that area but I did. I suppose I could take her hostage, force him to choose...*

Standing there, Hancock was tempted. But she decided against it, the memory of his quick understanding of the mark on her back, of Luffy promising Boa he would never share her secret coming to her mind. *Of all of us, I am the one best suited to fight Luffy as it is. I will not win this fight in so dishonorable a manner. It would somehow sully it, or at least the contest it was before Moria and Kuma rejoined it.*

“No, though I shiver at the thought perhaps Moria has a plan, one I can, ugh, piggyback on,” Boa mused, literally shivering at the idea of working with Moria further without the buffer of a battle or Kuma around. Yet despite that revulsion, she moved to follow Moria, taking her time for now, recuperating her strength, as she used her Kenbunshoku to follow the other Shichibukai.

OOOOOOO

Sanji grimaced as he finished putting the final touches on his makeshift crutch and splint. It had taken him several agonizing moments to curse his way up the side of the giant crater that Kuma’s Ursus Shock had created and then even longer to find bits of wood that he could work.

“Thank God that most of my clothing below the waist had survived,” he mused. That meant he’d been able to tear his pants to use as ties. The Busoshoku had protected his clothing far better than the rest of them, being the first part Sanji had learned to cover that way. “Damn it, if only I’d been able to keep my Busoshoku up longer, I wouldn’t even be hurt!”

Now, he looked around, wondering where the hell to go. He had been completely turned around in his fight against the Shichibukai, and while he knew he was on one of the sides of the island portion of *Thriller Bark*, he didn’t know precisely which one, other than it wasn’t the one overlooking the *Everlasting Resolve*. Grimacing, he looked around, trying to figure out which direction to go. With so much of the wall destroyed, he couldn’t figure out which direction would take him toward the center of the island zone.

As he looked around, he was startled by the somewhat nearby sound of lightning. Thanks to the fog around them, he couldn't see it; still, he knew what the sound of lightning meant. "Finally, the shitty captain is going to go all out."

Sanji understood why Luffy was reluctant to use his lightning powers on many levels, and yet, with this battle, Sanji felt he should probably have broken out the lightning the moment the three Shichibukai revealed themselves. "But he did so eventually, which means we might actually all get out of this alive. If the others are still alive. Nami-chwan, Makino-san, Laki-chwan, Robin-chan..." Sanji paused, tears coming to his one visible eye as he whined a bit. "I am so, so sorry I couldn't, I couldn't be there to help you! I just hope you and that Shitty Carpenter won your portion of this fight..."

Then he shook himself and began to move forward again, gritting his teeth against the pain. Even now, he wasn't going to give the bear-bastard the satisfaction of letting out a cry of pain from the bastard's attack. But as battered as he was, Sanji knew he couldn't take part in the fight between the Shichibukai again. "I gave a good account of myself... now it's time to find the ladies!"

He closed his eyes, murmuring, "Mellorine, Mellorine," under his breath, his visible eye turning into a heart as he pulled up all the memories of Nami and Makino and Laki he could. They were all together, and Sanji hoped that since he had seen Luffy before, Robin would be somewhere around the shitty captain. That left the other ladies for Sanji to find. "Mellorine!" he bellowed, and then he felt it. He felt the ladies out there, a little to the left of where he was already facing.

"It worked. I can sense where the ladies are! Yes, it is the power of love!" Ignoring the fact that he had just used Kenbunshoku for the first time, Sanji skipped or skipped as much as he could, which was oddly quite a bit given his ruined leg, in the direction where he sensed Laki and Makino and Nami.

Suddenly, Sanji dodged to the side, hopping up onto one foot into the air, then lashing out with a kick from the same foot, unwilling to put his ruined right leg through anything right now. Even when not using the leg, the throbbing was really freaking painful. Still, his unbroken leg's kick had created a Rankyaku, which intercepted the attack coming at him, what looked like a large spider's silken thread shot out at him.

As he landed, Sanji's eyes darted all around as one of his attackers spoke. "Monkey, monkey. It looks as if master Moria was right to send me out here. Your shadow will be a magnificent addition to master Moria's army!"

All around him, Sanji saw several of the small fighter mice that he had seen before, while moving through the forest with Robin, Makino and the masochistic ass Sanji had to call captain. The speaker was a large tarantula-like creature, with a monkey's face and scars running everywhere.

Ignoring the pain from his leg, Sanji moved to pull out his box of cigarettes only to remember as his hand tapped painfully red skin that not only didn't he have a cigarette, his shirt had also been turned into ash. *Dammit! How can I cut a proper knightly appearance without dressing in style?*

Still, he shook his head, glaring hard at the massive tarantula creature. "You'd be the leader of this group?"

"I'm Tararan, the leader of the capture team! And you're our latest prey, Monkey, monkey!" With that, Tararan and his spider mice attacked, the seven of them launching their spider silk at Sanji. Normally, there would have been more than a dozen of them, but the Straw Hats had wiped out several of Tararan's followers before this.

Sanji desperately dodged and ducked around the flying spider silk, staring at the sticky mass thoughtfully as it passed them by. "Spider silk," he mused aloud. "That's supposed to be really strong stuff, right?"

The tarantula-like zombie monster darted forward, then leaped towards Sanji as he escaped the initial cordon. "Monkey, monkey! Once I capture you, you'll never get out. I captured your swordsman and your doctor this way. You're no different!"

"Comparing me to Marimo? That's a hanging offense, you big bug!" His eyes narrowing, Sanji used his broken leg to kick off of the ground, grimacing in pain but keeping his howl of agony internal as he got in closer before Tararan could respond, kicking out hard into the creature's face. The kick sent the creature sprawling, and then Sanji turned.

Launching himself towards a few others, Sanji twisted himself into a corkscrew midair as the silken globs came close. Thrusting his broken leg out towards the attack, Sanji used his other leg to speed up the spin, continually pushing off the air. *I hope this works!*

A second later, the spider mouse's spider silk impacted his foot. The centrifugal force he had created pulled the spider silk forward and up his leg, wrapping it the limb and his makeshift splint in a silk cocoon, and then Sanji halted his corkscrew attack, kicking up and in a different direction tearing the silken thread just as the spider mouse had been pulled off its legs and into the air.

The end result of this maneuver was that Sanji's leg from foot up to his thigh was covered in spider silk, and tapping his legs onto the ground a second later, Sanji was relieved to feel far less pain than the move would have caused otherwise given his wounds. "Excellent. Thanks for the cast," he mocked.

This caused Tararan to bellow in anger and his spider mice to bounce and hop in place, keening their cry in shock and fury. "You, you bastard! How dare you do that!?"

Tararan's tirade was cut off as several of his followers lost their shadows suddenly. The shadows were pulled toward where Sanji could see his captain unleashing his lightning on the enemy, and for a moment Sanji wondered what that was about. Tararan stared for a second before charging forward, shouting out desperately, "Take him! Take him, and master Moria will award us with our lives!"

The three surviving spider mice charged forward as well, but Sanji simply smirked at them. With the added help of the spider silk on his leg, he lifted his other leg and twirled in place for a few seconds, shouting out "Diable Jambe!"

Once more, Sanji's other foot lit on fire, the fire caused by the friction of his foot and the ground, the fire going up his leg. He whirled around into the spider silk coming towards him, his foot striking each attack, the spider silk catching on fire before Sanji kicked off the ground with his ruined leg. That caused him some pain even with the spider silk cushioning it, but Sanji had come to the Straw Hats with an insane level of toughness, and that toughness had been built on by adventure and training since.

The move put him in the air, where he flipped up and over the currently burning spider silk, which raced toward the spider mice and Tararan. While the spider mice panicked and ended their attacks, skittering away, Sanji's still-burning foot crashed into Tararan's face before the creature could dodge, the flames catching on the zombie's face like it was oil-soaked tinder.

As the tarantula monster's legs crumpled, Sanji pushed off, landing near another spider mouse, kicking it hard before it could cut off its earlier attack. The creature became a flaming rocket, catching on fire even as it flew through the air, while Tararan rolled, trying desperately to put out the fire that Sanji had caused.

Sanji darted forward, lashing out with two more flame kicks into Tararan, launching him off the ledge down into where the water had begun to lap at where the crater from Kuma's Ursus shock met the ocean far below. On fire and in metaphorical agony, Tararan couldn't concentrate on his surroundings and fell into the water with a sizzle.

Finishing off the last of the demoralized and frightened spider-mice was easy, and Sanji smiled, patting his ruined leg in its protective covering, before hobbling along in the direction of the mast-keep, where he sensed the ladies were.

OOOOOO

Ozoro sighed as he stared into the distance at the large mast thing. "Mm... Have I been here before, have I not been here before? Have I seen this before, I think I have, yes."

The one eye-giant among giants stared at the mast-thing thoughtfully for a moment, then brought a fist down into his other palm to the sound of a boom that sounded almost like several cannons had gone off at once. "I see. This place is like a haunted house, right? All the

fog and corpses I'm seeing down below point to that. So, they must be able to move stuff around!" He nodded his head thoughtfully. "That makes perfect sense. Hmph, that's sneaky."

Ozoro turned, looked over his shoulder to make certain the large keep thing was directly behind him and pointed ahead. "Still, that means that I just have to keep going away from it. Eventually, they'll get the point that they can't try to fool me again. Although if they try, I might as well just destroy it and see what happens after."

"What idiocy are you spouting now, moh!" a voice said, but Ozoro didn't turn his one eye to look in that direction, knowing what he would see. The little bat creature had been flying around his head for several minutes now, occasionally alighting on his ear or in his hair. "How can we move the ship without the mast, Oz? Not even you could do something like that. Now stop this idiocy and..."

"Shut up. And my name is Ozoro!" Ozoro answered dully, waving one hand, creating a gust of air that nearly sent Hilton careening away through the air. "I'll do what I want."

"Good grief!" Hilton stumbled through the air, landing on his shoulder. "You really are a problem child, aren't you?"

Ozoro rolled his eye, muttering about how he was no one's child, as he continued on his way, very carefully putting one foot directly in front of the other, staring ahead of him.

Eventually, as lightning crashed and blasted behind him, Ozoro found himself overlooking the ocean. He stared at it thoughtfully, then at his swords, before laying down on his stomach and thrusting one of them down into the ocean. He obviously hit nothing, and after a second, Ozoro tried to figure out if thrusting his upper body into the water would be a good idea before deciding against it.

"As I thought, the ocean," he intoned slowly, pulling the sword back, staring out into the distance as he nodded sagely. "Hmm, now how to keep going. I thought this was a giant boat of some kind, given how it has been rocking thanks to the fighting going on back there. But it turns out that I'll have to find a giant boat... for... myself."

He paused, slowly staring into the distance. "I, I have... have to keep going, I have my... I will be the strongest giant..."

As Hilton watched, Ozoro's face slowly went slack even as he continued to try to mutter to himself as the image of Master Moria appeared in his mind. It had been flicking in and out of his mental view for hours, but now it stayed, overriding Ozoro's thoughts.

"The strongest... the world's... swords..." Then Ozoro shook himself and pushed himself to his feet, looking at his shoulder to where Hilton was. "What am I saying? I am to be master Moria's strongest zombie. That is my purpose, right?"

Hilton breathed a sigh of relief and pulled the large jug of wine he always carried on his back around to take a hasty sip, settling his nerves. This wasn't the first time he'd had to do that today, after all it had been a very trying time,. Surely Master Moria would not begrudge him a libation or forty?

Even now, something of Zoro must have still lived within Ozoro, as he said, "Hey, don't drink in front of me unless you've got some to share, ya fat-bat!"

"Moh, this would be but a tiny sip for you! But if you head back to the mast-keep, I'm certain we could find you something. Finding something put it in for you to hold would be more difficult but doable," the bat man wheedled.

Ozoro nodded and intoned simply, "Lead the way. I don't trust my own sense of direction.

If Zoro or any of the Straw Hats been there, that alone would've told them that while it still colored the giant zombie's actions, Zoro's personality had finally lost entirely to the imperatives that Moria's Devil Fruit put into his victims.

OOOOOOO

To those who fell into Thriller Bark's trap, the face of the island was the mansion where Hogback stayed. The mast-keep rose behind it, normally connected to the mansion by a series of underground hallways and aboveground staircases leading through Perona's fairy forest. Of course, all those connections were gone now. What hadn't been destroyed in Luffy's Shishi Hokodan had been demolished by the falling stones from the hits to the mast.

At the back of the mast-keep, the complex spread out slightly aboveground and underground, connecting the docks at the back of the island portion of the huge ship to the mast-keep via a series of staircases and walkways. It was under that series of walkways where random rooms and supplies were normally kept. It was in one of those random rooms, long since repurposed, where the Kuja Pirates and the trio of Straw Hat prisoners were to be kept.

And it was being transported to that place where an Amazon began to awaken in the form of one of their number, the diminutive Ran, who woke up only to go from relief at being alive to horror at finding herself in chains. This was a nightmare scenario for any Kuja Pirate, who well understood why someone would want one of them in chains. Ran and the other women who had served on Hebihime-sama's crew for long were not nearly naïve as the rest of their folk were when it came to men and what a man would do with them if they were captured.

Of course, it had never come up before. Not with the Pirate Empress as their leader, but there were stories of what had happened before Hancock came into her power. Before, the Gorgon Sisters were cursed with their powers.

So, it was understandable that Ran's first reaction was panic followed by rage. She pulled at the chains, heaved herself to her feet, and saw several zombies nearby looking at her, startled. "Treachery!" Ran shrieked and lunged towards one of them, tackling him to the ground. Once the zombie was on the ground, Ran used the chains around her wrist as a flail hammering the strange giraffe-creature's head, smashing him down.

Her shout roused two of her Kuja sisters, Sweet Pea and Cosmos, both big-bodied women who could take a lot of punishment. Now they began to move as well, tossing the zombies holding them from side to side. Compared to most of the zombies trying to control them, the two Amazons were far larger and more powerful, unlike the short Ran.

"Get them under control!" shouted one of the zombies. He was one of the last two general zombies still 'alive,' a man much the same size as Zoro or Sanji, but slightly broader in the shoulders, with spiky red hair and a huge blade on his back, which he pulled into his hand quickly. He was also wearing just a pair of black and white pants shorn at the knees, showing his various scars. "We've taken so many losses, we need their shadows!"

"Right!" the others all shouted in chorus. Most of them were Wild Zombies taken from Perona's troops, along with a few from the forest and three soldier zombies from the cemetery who had lived through running into the Straw Hats in the cemetery by the simple expedient of not having been there, busy inside the keep with other duties. The general zombie charged forwards, knocking Sweet Pea out with a single blow to the back of the head, shocking Cosmos to stumble backward and down the stairs. However, the zombie found himself near Frankie.

Franky woke up as the back of his head impacted the side of the stone stairs that they were being carried up. He stared for a moment at this creature from beyond the grave, remembered what Brook-bro had told them about the zombies of Thriller Bark. And, in particular, what their weaknesses were. "Heh, I knew I saved this trick for a reason! Fresh Fire!"

Opening his mouth, Franky shot a fireball out, which engulfed the zombie and turned the General Zombie into a torch. If he had been one of the generals who wore armor, he might have survived, but as it was, the zombie went up like a torch, and his shriek terrified the rest of the surrounding zombies to retreat as it danced around before collapsing. Within seconds the shadow within dissipated into the air, returning to its owner before the distant Moria, who had quite a lot of other things on his mind right now could do anything about it.

"Hah!" Franky stood up, looked down at the chains on him and snarled, knowing internally that the lack of cola was going to affect him now. "Y, you're going to have to try harder than that to chain the suuuuper me!" As he tried to break them.

"Rally to the blue-haired one!" Ran thrust one of the zombies off her and moved to slap one of her still-unconscious sisters. The Straw Hats weren't allies, but they at least shared an enemy right now. That was good enough. That slap got the Amazon, Daisy, up, and she surged, hitting a Zombie right between the legs, hurling him up and over the stair's safety railing.

However, before Amazons or the pirate could get away, ghosts swooped down, and a shout of “Negative Hollow!” was heard as the ghosts flew through their targets.

Daisy and Cosmos fell, overcome by the negative feelings. Ran went so far as to curl up into a little ball and start rocking in place. “I’m not brave, I’m not strong, the princess chose me by random lot! I want to return and be... be a snake farmer.”

The Straw Hat pirate’s reaction was even funnier for the hovering Ghost Princess, and she laughed as he intoned, “I’m not worth the oil I put in my hair, the cola I drink, it’s the only thing that keeps me going. I’m not super. I’m a nail, a nail that is hammered day by day by my own mediocrity...”

“Horohorohoro! That is great! I actually think that’s the best reaction I’ve heard in weeks,” Perona cooed, then flew in front of Ran, the only Amazon still fighting. “And what about you, hmm?”

Ran gasped, flinching away, as the pink-haired girl’s hands reached for her, stunned as they phased through her face. “Then another hollow caught her from the side, and she too collapsed into ennui.”

Ignoring the Kuja pirate’s moaning about how she was destined to be left behind by her princess, Perona turned to the zombies, gesturing with one hand airily. “Get more chains on them, you idiots.” As they hastened to obey, Perona looked around, scowling. “With Absalom’s idiot dead, there should be someone else around her to give you all orders. Where’s Gentleman Hippo?”

“S, sorry mistress,” one of them muttered, “but Gentleman Hippo was killed recently. We’re not certain when, but we think he must’ve gotten involved with the fight against the Straw Hat’s captain somehow.”

None of the zombies who had witnessed Lola and her crew infiltrate the tower had survived, and Perona’s hollows hadn’t either, so while the other monster zombies knew that their second-in-command wasn’t around any longer, they didn’t have any idea how that it happened.

Perona cursed, zooming around for a few moments, then said, “Fine, I’ll send Kumashi here, I suppose. Darn it! I prefer to have him close by, but this is important.” She scowled, then stared at the zombies who had stopped moving to listen to her. “Did I say you could stop? Get to work on chaining them up more!”

Soon enough, another hollow led to Kumashi out of the keep and down the stairs, while in the distance, the Straw Hat’s vessel came in from the secondary gate leading to the back or aft portion of *Thriller Bark*. That at least made Perona nod. “At least Absalom did something right today! Where is he, by the way?” she asked, looking down at one of the other zombies.

Meanwhile, her favorite zombie, Kumashi, grabbed the Straw Hat pirate, twisting his arms behind his back, as another hollow zoomed through him, keeping him docile. The arms were held there by Kumashi, while other zombies used chains originally on the most wounded members of the two enemy crews to keep the large pirate at bay.

“Erm he um, he took two of the prisoners with him and a few of the others Mistress. He was intent on, um, getting married to the two of them,” one of the smaller zombies answered.

Perona snarled, shaking her head as she stared off into the distance for a second. “Of course, that moron would concentrate on his perversions. Ugh, I swear, before the Kujas arrived, he was the most trustworthy between him and Hancock, but Boa-sama and the Kujas just proved too much, I guess. What about Tararan?”

“We don’t know, Mistress. The last time we saw him, Tararan was heading out into the forest for some reason,” the same zombie answered.

“Huh. Well, I suppose Tararan must have gotten orders from Master Moria. Or maybe those spider mice of his reported something.” Sighing Perona turned her attention away from Absalom and Tararan, and to the events of the day, as well as what she should do now. This whole operation had been incredibly draining on their reserves, and she didn’t know if it was done with yet. *I heard that huge explosion, but who created it, I don’t know, and I know that Boa-sama is out there still fighting their captain with Master Moria. I need to figure out what’s going on out there and get back in touch with Master Moria.*

“Kumashi,” she ordered, “keep the prisoners safe. And keep them locked up. I don’t care what you have to do but keep them locked up. There’s still that cook guy, Black Leg, out there. I’ll be sending ghosts out to find him soon. Plus, their captain.”

She shivered a little, shaking her head. The last thing Perona had seen was Luffy fighting off Kuma, Boa Hancock and Master Moria’s shadow, and she was grateful that she wouldn’t be a part of that fight. Whatever green energy blasts Luffy had released had used when hit by her Negative Hollows utterly destroyed her zombies and had stung Perona’s mind something fierce. For some reason, it had hit her like it was a migraine as if all the negativity of one of her ghosts had been thrust through her own head, although it hadn’t lasted long, thankfully.

Perona looked down at the Amazons for a moment, watching as the zombies methodically knocked out two other Kuja pirates who were groaning and coming to. She then looked over at Sandersonia and Marigold, still strung up in the water, visible here tied to the docks below. Only their heads were visible now, the rest of their bodies invisible under the water.

“Sorry...” she muttered, more to herself than them as she remembered that she had become kind of friendly with a few of the Kuja. “But this is the life of a pirate, you know, survival of the fittest and all that.”

Kumashi looked up at her in confusion and went to speak, but Perona whirled on him, seemingly having a sixth sense for when he would do something she felt was un-cute. "Don't speak Kumashi! You know that's not cute!" With a scowl, she turned away, moving off into the distance above. High above them, she was nearly out of sight when the colored ghost burst out of existence.

For a second, Kumashi stared at where his Mistress's special ghost had hovered then, with a shrug, turned back to the prisoners. It wasn't unusual for her to cut the ghost off abruptly like that if she shifted her full personality to another ghost. With his mistress no longer there, he began to bark out orders, his voice muffled by the mask over his mouth.

The reason for Perona's abrupt departure wasn't the fact that she was done overseeing that operation, though. Rather, her real body had been shaken awake. While Perona's consciousness was gone, Chopper had finally regained consciousness and now was wiggling next to her in her bed in Perona's secret room.

Perona actually had several different rooms in the main structure of the mast-keep. One of them overlooked her garden, which was normally staffed with 'cute' animal-type zombies, and that was her regular peacetime room. Another was her play area, where she kept all of her stuffed animals and toys. Most of those toys looked like something from a Gothic Lolita's mad dreams. However, she had a third room hidden near the center of the mast with a secondary bed. This was where Perona went when she was concentrating all of her energies on directing her ghosts from afar, hidden away from nearly everyone.

That was where she was now, although she wasn't alone even here. A trio of animal zombies waited nearby. But it was the Straw Hat's doctor who had woken her up. Opening her eyes, Perona stretched, smiled, and looked down at Chopper's wide-eyed, frantic stares as he tried to move this way and that, his voice muffled by a mask around his mouth.

"Oh, don't worry," she crooned, stroking his head. It was supposed to be comforting, but from an enemy, it just made Chopper stare at her in shock. Not that Perona noticed. "You're not going to get hurt. You're not even going to have your shadow taken! Your cute enough as you are, no need to make you a zombie and useful too!" she squealed, pulling him into a hug, and Chopper froze. On the one hand, hugs were supposed to be nice. On the other hand, this was more than a little weird.

"If you're good, I might even let you talk occasionally. Your voice doesn't irritate me nearly as much as the zombies do!" she muttered, seemingly close to despair at even the thought of the zombie voices.

Chopper decided to go along with things, the better to figure out the best time to escape. Chopper slowly nodded, and a rumble from his stomach echoed around the room. Perona laughed at that, shaking her head with a smile. For some reason, Chopper reflected that all girls seemed to have nice smiles. *Her laugh is just wrong, though.*

She pulled his mask off and looked at him sternly. "I can go and send one of the zombies down to grab some preprepared food, but you're not going to say anything silly like 'let me go,' or 'you'll never get away with this,' right? I've heard it before, and I've never seen the point of those sayings."

Chopper opened his mouth, then closed it, but before shrugging and saying, "Um, it, er, it does look like you're sort of getting away with it, but until my captain's down, I still think you won't." *And if I could get any leverage here, I could break free!* But the spider mice had tied him up with the spider webs, and it was too strong for him to tear in this form, and it was so tight that Chopper knew he'd hurt his arms badly if he transformed.

"... I'll allow that one, as I can honestly see where your confidence is coming from," Perona admitted, shrugging her shoulders. "He's definitely on the same scale as my master Moria. Is he really as much of a combat junkie as he appears? The last thing I saw of him was when he was facing off with my master and our allies and grinning."

"Allies?" Chopper questioned, paling as he started to get a sinking feeling of what they had run into here. *Allies as in more than one Shichibukai!?* his mind screamed at him.

Perona grinned and nodded. "Horohorohoro. Yep. Allies. The Kuja Pirates, and their leader, and the Tyrant too," *For a given value anyway. Still, at least we won't do anything to Kuma. He's too damn scary.*

Chopper was about to ask for more information, hoping that the talkative girl's willingness to share would continue, when there was a rumble from above.

Kuma had just deflected one of Luffy's larger attacks, and the blast of lightning had impacted the mast-keep only a few stories above Perona's hideout. The top portion of the mast-keep had taken so much damage thanks to the *Everlasting Resolve* and Ozoro that this was the last straw for a goodly portion of the inner buttresses of the tower. Several floors collapsed, creating a cascade effect as the floors below those also collapsed.

Both Perona and Chopper looked up as the ceiling above them shattered, the stone falling towards them, and screamed, with Perona clinging to Chopper, both their mouths open in silent screams, their tongues lolling out as their eyes went wide. "AAAHHHHH!!!"

The nearby zombies waiting on Perona also screamed, as only one of them was safe near the doorway. But it wasn't their own un-life they were afraid for. "Perona-sama!"

"Swordless style, Black Fist!" a voice shouted, and suddenly, Zoro was there. He had been smashing his way in a straight line toward where he sensed his swords for several minutes now and had just smashed the floor of Perona's room. Now he leaped forward, one fist covered with Busoshoku as he flung out several punches at the collapsing masonry. The bits of stone shattered into pieces, which were flung everywhere, saving everyone within the room.

Perona gaped up at him, then gasped as Zoro's free hand clamped down over her throat. Around them, the trio of stunned zombies who had been stunned by the sudden reversal charged forwards, but Zoro placed a hand over Perona's throat crouching over her like a striking tiger. "I can crush her throat before any of you get to me," he warned. "Besides, I just saved her life when you idiots were too slow."

Kangaroo Boxer, Sad Elephant, and Dour Satyr (all of whose looks had made their names easy) paused, staring at their mistress. In turn, Perona stared up at Zoro, wide-eyed from her near-death experience, and now the threat to that life by the man who had saved her.

"H, H, horohoro," she tried to force out. "D, do you honestly think you can get out of here in one piece? An, and how did you even get out anyway!? I saw you when you were being dragged down to the brig, and you were wrapped in so many freaking chains you looked like a ball!"

"Your zombies don't exactly impress me, and whose hand is around whose throat right now? You think you can conjure up a ghost before I squeeze?" Zoro questioned. "And who just saved your life? Unless you could have survived those falling stones?" He then shrugged. "As for escaping, Brook helped."

Scowling at that, Perona set aside her confusion on Zoro's presence, looking away and biting her lip. This reaction was not entirely from the way Zoro's words reminded her just how close she had come to death just now. No, there was something about this whole experience, the look he was giving her, something about it causing her to blush and fidget underneath him. "What do you want?" she asked instead.

"That's better," Zoro said, the grip on her throat releasing slightly, becoming more of a hold rather than a crushing grip.

That didn't cause Perona's blush to go away. Instead, the touch and the look in Zoro's eyes made her blush anew and internally, Perona shook her head. *Darn it, I read way too many trashy romance novels where the good hero falls for the bad girl of the bad villain busts in and ravishes the good princess... and not entirely against her will, either.*

"I want my swords, which I notice are over there in the corner, and I want Chopper." Perona had been given Zoro's swords to care for by the Risky Brother, who had stayed with Zoro as his shadow was taken. The other brother had already dropped off Chopper by that point, so Perona hadn't even noticed, too busy cooing about the tied-up Chopper.

"Chopper?" Perona muttered, confused before looking over at the doctor. "Oh..."

Both of them paused as elsewhere, lightning flashed, barely perceptible in the distance. This entire level of the keep had been opened up by the collapsing masonry from above, letting

Perona and the others looking out into the distance to where lightning sent lights through the fog in the distance.

“A storm?” Perona muttered. “Huh, weird timing.”

Zoro’s grin widened slightly, but he didn’t reply, instead simply tapping the side of her throat with his thumb, getting her attention once more. “Do you agree? Release them in exchange for me saving your life.”

Perona looked over at the doctor and shrugged. “I’ll agree to let you take Chopper and your swords. Although I’m not going to agree to not come after you afterward. I want to try to convince Chopper to work with us in the future! Especially me...” she muttered, shaking her head.

Both pirates’ brows furrowed at once, and Zoro used his free hand to release Chopper, tearing off some of the ropes around him, his fingers glowing black again as he tore spider silk like it was so much string.

“Why do you want me to work with you? I thought you just wanted me to be like some talking moving teddy bear,” Chopper growled.

“That too,” Perona said with a nod, which banged her chin against Zoro’s hand around her throat, causing her to remember its existence, and look up at him again where he crouched over her in bed. *Gah, it’s just like that scene in the Dark Prince and the White Witch!* Perona cried internally, blushing once more. “C, could you get off me now! I agreed to your terms.”

Zoro frowned, staring down at her and tapped his thumb against the side of her throat meaningfully again. “Answer the question.”

Fighting back another blush, Perona scoffed. “Do you honestly think I want Hogback to my medical needs! There isn’t a man on Thriller Bark that isn’t a freaking pervert!”

Chopper hopped off the bed, instantly growing to his full size, causing Perona to gape, not having seen that through her hollows. “That makes sense, I suppose... wait, Hogback!” even in big form, Chopper’s voice squeaked as he said that name, his eyes turning into stars as he hopped up and down like a child on a sugar high. “Are, are you talking about Doctor Hogback? He’s a revolutionary in the field of medicine!”

“He’s also a giant pervert,” Perona answered bluntly. “Not as bad as Absalom has been, since Boa-sama and her crew arrived but still pretty bad.” Perona laughed, “Horohorohoro, he came here to work with Master Moria because he’d heard about the zombies and wanted to make a zombie out of his ‘love’.” Perona held up both hands to make quote marks, rolling her eyes. “The woman obviously didn’t return his affection, to say the least. Heck, from what I remember of the woman, I think she was already married.”

“Okay,” Zoro replied with a nod from where he was still hovering over Perona on the bed. “That is kind of freaky.”

Chopper also nodded, shaking his head as the image of Dr. Hogback, one of his personal heroes, shattered into tiny little pieces in his mind. “I, I guess it’s true, one should never meet one’s heroes...”

“Meh, be your own hero, Chopper. That’s the only way to go forward,” Zoro retorted, causing Chopper to shake his head and mutter about how Zoro was so cool. Meanwhile, Zoro hopped off the bed, his hand accidentally stroking down Perona’s chest as he went, causing her to ‘eep,’ shiver and blush again, although Zoro didn’t notice as he strode over to grab his swords.

The swordsman smiled as he felt the willpower of Sandai Kitetsu reaching out to him, furious at having been dropped and forgotten. The spirit of the Wado Ichimonji was much calmer about things, a peaceful hello sort of feeling coming from it. For Sandai, Zoro was its semi-annoying master, the best option who occasionally proved to be fun to be around. For Wado, Zoro was more of an acquaintance or friendly stranger rather than anything else. But that was all right. It was just Wado Ichimonji’s way.

Zoro strapped both swords to his side, breathing a sigh of relief at the familiar weight, his hand falling on their hilts, touching them almost tenderly.

He stared out the open door, then looked back over at Perona, who had sat up in bed, staring at him and Chopper. In the distance, more lightning crashed, the lights dazzling in the fog. “What the heck is going on out there?” Perona muttered, momentarily distracted by her own issues.

One of her zombies reminded her of them by shouting out, ‘Mistress, shouldn’t we attack them now?’

“Do you want to be chopped into tiny pieces?” Perona muttered, staring hard at Zoro. “We’re even now, right? And you’re not going to turn around and attack me? If you do, I’ve got a negative hollow with your name on it!” she blustered.

Zoro nodded back and then smirked evilly, gesturing over his shoulder to the lightning. “Yeah, we’re good so long as you don’t attack first. Because that is telling me that my captain’s got pissed about something. So, I’d suggest that you, if you want to live through the day, make yourself scarce. Beyond that, did any of you see where the giant went?”

“The giant. Do you mean Oz? That huge thing that nearly smashed the tower to pieces a while ago?” Perona shivered. If she had really been in her regular bedroom or indeed any of her normal haunts rather than the hidden bedroom, that monster’s attack on the mast could well

have killed her then. *Just like this last attack, whatever it was, might have killed me and Chopper both.*

At that thought, Perona looked around at the utter destruction that had replaced this floor of the keep and then up to the open sky above. Slowly she shook her head, realizing that whatever attack had hit the keep had denuded it above her floor. Perona then looked over at Zoro, blushing again, before shaking her head. *Stop that! Fantasize in your own time, not when your life is on the line.*

Hollows appeared all around her, small and large, as she stared at Zoro, waiting to see if he attacked her. But Zoro paid her no mind, looking at one of the zombies who had hesitantly raised his hand. "I think I saw Ozoro heading that way," he said, pointing through the wall.

Zoro stared in that direction, then his hands flickered before Wado clinked back into its sheathe. A neat square chopped out of the stone, falling backward into the passageway outside in the precise direction zombie and pointed. "Right, thanks," Zoro answered perfunctorily. He really wanted to chop the creepy zombie animals up, but they hadn't attacked yet, and from this range, Zoro doubted he could defend himself against Perona's powers. "Chopper, you find the rest of the crew. I've got no idea what's going on there, but maybe your nose can come in handy again."

"Are you sure? You don't have your shadow, so you'll be fighting yourself," Chopper questioned hesitantly. "And Perona said that they captured the rest of the crew, Franky and the girls."

"Huh. In that case, Chopper, I'll trust you to get them free. As for me, yeah, it will mean fighting myself. In giant form to boot," Zoro ended cheerfully, smirking now as he looked over at Chopper, accidentally catching Perona in the same look. "Don't you think that sounds interesting? A worthy challenge for the man who is going to become the greatest swordsman in the world."

With that, he turned, walking through the chopped doorway he'd made.

Behind them, Chopper and Perona stared, saying as one, "Zoro/Roronoa, so cool!"

Perona then smacked her cheeks trying to ignore the fact she had just squealed like that while Chopper raced off, hopping down into the hole Zoro had used. Sniffing the air below Chopper could smell the route Zoro had come from, and moving off in a different direction, hoping to head outside. With his nose, he should detect something of the crew. Or at least, Chopper hoped so.

For her part, Perona had moved on from her momentary embarrassment and scowled, rubbing her forehead as she wondered what Zoro had meant about his captain taking things to the next level. *Wait, does that mean that guy was holding back!?* She thought, then shook her

head. *No way! No one would be stupid enough to try to hold back against not one but three Shichibukai.*

She looked up as a voice said, "Huh, now how the heck did this place move? Is that part of the tricks that you guys have planned out or something?"

Perona turned, staring at Zoro, who had just walked through the main door to her hidden bedroom. "What the, what are you doing back here?" she growled, her eyes narrowing as she re-summoned her hollow army all around her. "Did you decide to pick a fight with me anyway?"

"No," Zoro answered as if the idea hadn't occurred to him at all, and indeed it hadn't. "You're not a swordsman, and you don't have my shadow. So, unless you get into my way, I don't have much interest."

Perona scowled at that, irked by his tone, but Zoro went on lazily. "No, you must've done something to move this room. I was still moving in that direction that guy pointed," he jerked a thumb towards the zombie who had given him the directions, "and I arrived back here. So, it's your fault."

"That makes absolutely no sense! How the heck could even Master Moria have come up with rooms that could move?!" Perona shot back, shaking her head. "You just got turned around somehow."

Zoro's eyes narrowed. "Are you saying I've got no sense of direction?"

From several storied below them, Chopper shouted, "Yes!" from where he was navigating through the rubble, then wondered why he had done so.

The shout had been heard above, and Perona chortled, crossing her arms challengingly. "Horohorohoro. That sounds as if your crew would agree with me if I did," she taunted.

"Listen, woman!"

"Yes, yes, yes," Perona's earlier embarrassed reaction to Zoro was long gone by this point. She waved her hand, summoning up a negative hollow that moved up through the air.

She closed her eyes, her senses riding the ghost for a moment, much like Robin could use her own senses. After a moment, she shook her head, coming back to her body, summoning another hollow into being. "Oz is coming back this way," she reported, biting her lip in worry. "This Negative Hollow will take you to him. I'm not going to wish you good luck or anything, although, if the two of you do destroy one another, I'll be very happy. That thing looks to be out of control, whatever Master Moria might've said."

From this far away, Perona hadn't been able to see Hildon hiding among Oz's hair.

Zoro nodded slowly, staring at the hollow than Perona, before bowing his head. "Thanks," he said gruffly.

Perona flushed and was about to wave him off, saying something about how she couldn't let a little lost child go on his way without some supervision. However, before she could, Zoro went on jerking his thumb out towards the distant sound of lightning crashing. "That's my captain," he said simply. "The one creating the lightning. Like I said, if you want to live through the day, I'd suggest you get out of here."

Perona gawked at him, literally gawked. Her jaw dropped, her eyes widening and nearly popping out again, as the implication of that hit home as her tongue lolled in sheer horrified surprise.

By the time she got her voice back, Zoro was already gone, following the hollow ghost she had created to lead him towards Ozoro out the door once more. "He's a logia user!" she shrieked to the zombies around her, all of whom looked confused and worried about her sudden concern. "A logia user! Seriously!" Perona stomped around the room for a few minutes and only slowly got control of herself.

When she did, Perona raced out in the direction of the nearest outer wall towards the lights, pushing her way through the rubble with some difficulty to stare into the distance, watching as lightning blasted down in various shapes and sizes through the distant fog. She could see some of it being reflected away, a sign the other Shichibukai was engaged. A few bits of differently colored light could also be seen. But it was very obvious that all three of the Shichibukai were being pushed to their utmost and would probably lose. Perona didn't know much about logia powers, but she knew that they were, called the strongest power uniformly for a very good reason.

With that, she shook her head. *Master Moria's going to lose.* Shadow versus lightning was not a contest she would bet on the shadow in. Which meant that Zoro was correct. It was time to cut her losses.

She turned to her few remaining zombies, thrusting her fist up into the air. "All right, it's time to get moving. To the treasury!"

All of her zombies started to cheer, then paused, staring at her as Perona's words registered. Glaring at them, Perona tapped her foot irritably. "Well, get moving!"

They all hastened to obey, and Perona hurried after them, although she paused near the stairwell leading down, staring out a window there, out towards the aft portion of *Thriller Bark*. There, she saw the Straw Hat pirate's ship sailing towards them, moving to drop anchor beyond the docks. "Well, at least I have a way off *Thriller Bark*, Horohorohoro."

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere in this sprawling segment of the structure, a small church had been created for some reason in the past. Or perhaps it had been a part of whatever structure existed within the former castle before it, and the ground underneath it was incorporated into *Thriller Bark*. Whatever the case, this was where Absalom's wedding ceremony was taking place.

Although, while it was his wedding, Absalom wasn't actually taking part in the planning process. He had given that job to one of his last two general zombies, the drunkard John. While the preparation for the wedding went on around him, Absalom rested on one of the pews.

He had to. Absalom was just in too much pain and too exhausted for anything else. What few medical pills he'd found had dulled the pain a bit, but that also made him much more tired. "Well, where's Hogback?" he groaned, looking over at one of the zombies, a Risky Brother that he'd assigned to finding Hogback when the zombie came to him to pass on Moria's orders about the prisoners.

"Sorry Sir, Absalom sir!" The little squirrel creature said, bowing profusely towards him, looking scared. "I, I er, found him, but um, I think Hogback's dead. Er, living people tend to have more head, and not look as, um, smooshed."

"Damn," Absalom muttered. Then, he glanced over at the two still unconscious women resting nearby. His eyes traced their faces, both of them extremely beautiful. The Cat Burglar's face was framed with orange hair, a striking color, although her face was slightly more childish-looking than the blonde's. The blonde had slightly thinner cheekbones, a slightly less childish face. Although, while Nami's face looked simply expressive full stop, the blonde's looked like it was made for smiling.

Absalom wondered what her personality was like. He had tried to chat her up while the Amazons had been docked with *Thriller Bark* before, but Absalom hadn't gotten anywhere before Marigold interrupted him by the simple expedient of nearly smashing his head in.

He shivered at the memory, but a glance down at the blonde's chest made him forget all about that. *Hah, and now Marigold's rotting in the ocean, her shadow just waiting for Lord Moria to take it, and here is the blonde...Marguerite, I think her name is, and all of her bounty available to me.*

A perverted smile appeared on his face, and Absalom chortled until he winced, holding his chest. "Damn, that hurt! Thankfully, not below the belt, though. At least everything down there is working perfectly well, hehe hehe..."

However, he blinked as he realized that several of the zombies had moved over and picked up the two women. "Wait, what are you doing?"

“This is a wedding, you know, Absalom,” John said, chortling as he melted back another bottle, automatically holding the bottle in front of his chest to catch the wine as it spurted out one of the many sword wounds in his stomach. “The brides have to be wearing white.”

Absalom nodded understanding, losing himself in fantasies. He was knocked out of it as the two unconscious women were taken off to a side room, where a zombie dressed like a tailor waited for them to enter before following them in.

Looking around, Absalom hopped to his feet, and with John chuckling behind him, stealthily made his way over, activating his Devil Fruit as he snuck toward the door. As he looked inside, though, the end of a tape measure smacked almost unerringly between the eyes. “ARGGH!!!”

“No peeking, master!” the zombie tailor shouted before firmly locking the door.

Huffing, Absalom blustered, “If either of them wakes up and escapes, I’m going to tear your head off and dump it in the ocean!”

No one answered his threat, and Absalom sighed, moving back over to the few he had been resting on, laying out, groaning in pain.

However, before he closed his eyes, he saw two nearby zombies, two of only seven in attendance, stiffen. He was about to ask what was wrong when their mouths opened, and their shadows fled their bodies, leaving the now corpses to fall to the ground behind them with a clatter as they raced in the same direction. “What the... What was that about John?”

John shrugged his shoulders, chuckling again as he drank his wine. “I don’t know master Absalom, but it looks to me as if master Moria recalled their shadows for some reason.

“Why would he...” Absalom stared through the wall nearby wall in the direction the shadows had gone, then shook his head firmly. “No, I don’t want to know.”

He laid back, crossing his arms behind his head as a makeshift pillow. “I don’t want to know, and I don’t have to know. I’ll just take my brides, and, well, if master Moria loses, there’s the Straw Hat vessel to escape on, as well as the mini-bark.”

Such was the loyalty that master Moria created in those who followed.

OOOOOO

Once Chopper had filtered out the smell of zombie - kind of difficult thanks to how many types of zombies there were and how each type smelled slightly different, and got down to the base floor of the keep, he was able to find traces of Makino and lucky on the wind, although he had yet to find any place they had actually been yet. At one point, he lost them but found

Franky instead, and, assuming that all of the crew would be in the same place, headed in that direction, a hope that was rewarded by his picking up the two women's smells again through the smell of blood, decomposing flesh and other, less mentionable smells.

When the scents became even stronger, Chopper slowed down, transforming from his reindeer-type body into his normal body, sneaking along, scurrying from one hiding place to another.

On this floor, Chopper began to see dead zombies. Dead, as in their shadows were gone, their bodies just left where they had fallen. How that had happened, Chopper didn't know. But he wasn't so foolish as to think that his crew if they really were captured like Perona said, would be left unguarded regardless of whatever else was going on.

When he found them, the prisoners were corralled into what looked like a large storage area. Most of the storage area was taken up by dozens of differently sized refrigerators, marked with numbers which Chopper connected to the numbers he had occasionally spotted on some of the zombies. As he arrived, some of them were still being chained to the walls, and as Chopper looked around the corner, he saw that everything here dealing with the prisoners seemed to be somewhat makeshift. *But if Zoro broke out from the prison cells, it makes sense that they wouldn't want to bring the prisoners down there.*

However, the reasoning behind the prisoners' placement was even more understandable than that, which Chopper overheard a moment later.

"I can't believe how much damage the keep has taken in this battle!" mused one zombie to another. He was one of Penelope's zombies, a long-limbed man with a koala head wearing a striped shirt.

"I know. I mean, we've had pirate crews that could do some damage to our numbers before. But to damage *Thriller Bark*? Did you feel how that huge explosion rocked the entire ship? And now the ship is rocking every few minutes from other destinations! Master Moria isn't playing around, but neither our enemies, nyaa," the zombie the koala man was talking to answered. He was an odd Cheshire-raccoon creature, prowling around as he looked at the prisoners.

"At least we're not in danger of sinking, right?" another far more normal-looking zombie answered, causing the other two to look at him, and he went on tremulously. "R, right?" After the last few hours of one massive attack after another, it was clear the zombies were becoming more and more terrified of what might be happening.

"Enough jawing! Keep your eyes open. We've got a job to do. There are at least two, possibly three pirates still out there considering the reports from the Risky Brothers," Kumashi warned. His voice was deep and gravelly, and a part of Chopper could sympathize with

Penelope for thinking his voice wasn't cute. "If the singing swordsman and the first mate of the Straw Hats are still out there, we need to be on guard."

The other zombies were silent for a moment, then one of them raised a hand. "What Risky Brother was that anyway? I can never tell them apart."

"You mean they have separate names? I never knew that!" another zombie answered to much laughter.

As the zombies fell to talking, and Kumashi tried to bellow them into obedience, Chopper ignored them. Sticking his head out behind the corner for a moment, he took in the view quickly. He estimated there were about fifteen zombies, but there could be more, as he could see paintings as well, and he had been attacked by one such zombie already.

However, what was worse was the sight of his crew. They were scattered among other prisoners, all women. Before he pulled back, Chopper saw they were all wounded to a certain degree and wore primitive-looking garb. There were at least thirty of them, though again, Chopper couldn't tell if there were more of them hidden behind stone slabs set into the floor, or if a few women on those slabs were alive or corpses.

Franky was the one who stuck out the most. He was chained and gagged for some reason, slumping forward, his arms stretched and chained to either side of his head into a Y shape. His hair was lank and fell down into his face, which Chopper knew meant Franky was out of cola. He was also covered in bruises and dozens of actual dents in his chest and face, which also looked bruised and swollen behind the gag, his normal sunglasses shattered.

Picking out Makino and Laki was a little more difficult. Both of them had been moved to a separate section, and for a moment, Chopper hadn't been able to spot Laki's hair alongside another black-haired woman. But Makino's hair at least caught his attention. The next time Chopper stuck his head out, Kumashi had finally instilled some order among the zombies in the room but he was still able to look in the girls' direction again.

By doing so, Chopper saw the number of wounds they and the women directly around them had taken. Even from here, Chopper could see that several of the women had life-threatening wounds, gut wounds, sword wounds across the chest, and more. Worse was Laki and one of the other women. Even from here, Chopper could see the red on Laki's bandages, which meant they were still bleeding. *Gah, damn it, I need to free them quickly or else Laki might bleed out!*

She wasn't alone in that either. At least two of the other female pirates were in the same boat. And Makino looked as if she had taken a nasty head pummeling, including a head wound Chopper wanted to check out.

Yet someone was missing from the crew left behind on the Everlasting Resolve: nowhere did he see Nami. *Don't, don't tell me she's dead! Nami is too mean to die!* As he thought that, Chopper shook his head from where he was once more hiding among the rubble of the hallway leading to the refrigeration chamber. *No, wait, that's a mystery for later. I can't do anything for her right now.* Right now, Chopper had to get in there somehow. And staring at the animal zombies, he got an idea.

Retreating, he sniffed the air and followed his nose to Thriller Bark's kitchen. There, he found some salt and stuffed it into his ki space, along with a few soda bottles. On the way back, Chopper stopped at a few of the zombies, gathering what he needed, and then, with some difficulty, bandaging himself to look as if he too was a zombie, transforming into his muscle form. By the time he was done, he looked like a doctor that had been in a bad accident, his face covered by a mask from Chopper's supplies, much like the Doctor's coat. He made certain that his number was prominent and made his way back to where the prisoners were kept, moving openly down the corridor.

There, most of the zombies stared for a second then just nodded at him as he arrived, but Kumashi was made of more intelligent stuff. "You, what are you doing here? I've never seen you before."

Praying that the different zombie units would not know the numbers of the others, Chopper nodded. "Perona-sama sent a ghost for me. I am one of Dr. Hogback's assistants. The lady wanted me to make certain that none of the prisoners died before their shadows could be taken. But getting here through the keep after that last attack struck it was much harder than it should've been."

The large dangerous looking teddy bear furrowed his brows, one large paw clenching, short claws appearing there, gleaming in the limited torchlight. Chopper just stared back stolidly like he imagined a zombie would, and after a tense moment, Kumashi subsided. "Do it then. The wounded are over there. Start with the Kuja pirates. Leave the two Straw Hat women from last."

"Right," Chopper answered, moving in that direction, while inwardly cursing. Yet he kept up his docile act as he moved over to the first of the patients. He wanted to start with Makino and Laki, but given how suspicious Kumashi was and his orders, he didn't think he would get away with it. *And given their numbers, I'm not certain I could fight them all even with salt. Certainly not while protecting the prisoners.*

However, something new was about to be added to the predicament. As Chopper finished his first patient, a voice intoned from nearby, "Now this just isn't on. Having so many ladies prisoner? That is not the action of gentlemen, sirs. Have at thee!"

From the doorway Chopper had just left, Brook appeared, hurling himself towards the zombies. At first, it appeared as if his attacks had missed, but then the koala headed man fell, a

gash opening up across the zombies' chest causing it to stumble back and shout in pain, whereupon Brook flicked his other hand forward, sending a dark of salt into the zombie's mouth.

Behind him came several men along with a woman. Several used slings, while a man with his arm in a sling waved a sword clumsily in his other hand as he stood next to them.

Knowing that the men with her had taken too much of a battering to be useful, Lola had retreated to the forest with Brook, hooking up with the remaining survivors. As lightning crashed in the distance, showing Lola's instincts had been right, she grabbed seven more men who could fight and brought them with her as they moved back into the keep. They wanted to search for the other prisoners to see if they could get the Kuja pirates to help fight against the zombies and Moria, although they were deathly afraid of running into either one of Perona's ghosts or Absalom.

Along the way, Brook had dealt with several surprise zombies for them before this, letting Lola rest. But now Lola and her followers launched themselves forward in support, only for many to pause, a wail of fear going up among them. "Oh crap, it's Kumashi! We're so boned!"

Shaking her head, Lola regathered herself and leaped to meet Kumashi as he barreled forward, twin swords in her hand. "Shut up! I've got him. Take on the others!"

"Get them! But remember, we can't kill these fools, or else any one of us might lose our shadows when they die," Kumashi ordered, his voice even deeper and more growling than before.

Recognizing this as his best opportunity to free his crewmen, Chopper turned away from his current patient, reaching down for the chains on the woman's willowy arms. She had groggily started to wake up as he operated on her and now looked on with wide eyes as Chopper tore the chains apart, then raced over towards Franky. "Franky!"

While awake, when Chopper had come in, Franky hadn't been able to do anything beyond watching Chopper with his eyes, making no move to show he had recognized the disguised Chopper. Now he grinned around the gag, then his eyes brightened even more as Chopper pulled out several bottles of cola, trying to figure out where Franky's fridge was. Once he found it, Chopper again wondered where the food Franky ate went, but again shook off that mystery, sliding the two bottles of cola he'd found inside.

Turning, Chopper smashed aside a surprise zombie as it came at him from the wall, followed by several more, the surprise zombies coming at him from small sconces or bits of furniture given life by the placement of shadows within. There weren't fifteen zombies here, there were at least 24. Four of them were already down thanks to Brook, but the hidden surprise zombies were more than enough to tip the battle's balance.

“Can you get out of those chains?” Chopper shouted as he punched out at another zombie.

Seeing this, Kumashi grew furious, his eyes turning bloodshot as he turned in Chopper’s direction, his voice turning even more gravelly with anger. “Wh, traitor! How dare you!”

Doing so, Kumashi took a cut across his forearms from the big-lipped woman. However, he was a zombie and couldn’t care less about pain or wounds. His return blow smashed Lola aside, sending her reeling into one of her fellows, who fell with a cry, a spear having found his side from one of the other zombies. She turned, hacking the spear into pieces and knocking the zombie in the face, opening his mouth so that another one of the sling-wielding crewmen could lob some of their hoarded salt packets into the zombie’s maw.

But even as the zombie died, he’d reached out, grabbing at Lola’s sword, and held it, slowing her down. Another blow from Kumashi caught Lola in the center of her chest, hurling her the length of the refrigeration chamber, where she crashed into the opposite wall. Lola did not get up, only groaning where she lay.

However, Chopper had turned aside, Franky having answered that he could get himself out of the chains binding him. Normally a person held in this position, arms chained behind his head at an angle above his shoulders, would’ve been in trouble. But Franky’s shoulders had also seen quite a lot of modification during the self-operation that had changed him into a cyborg. “Suuuper! Well done, Chopper!” Franky shouted as he strained, pulling his arms forward, first bending then shattering the chains holding him.

One of the nearby zombies charged towards Franky, but Franky grabbed the short zombie with one hand, holding him in the air, noticing that a keychain was on his waist. He plucked it out with a few fingers from his other hand, then used the zombie as a projectile, hurling him towards Kumashi. Busy demolishing several of the other shadowless victims, the blow caught Kumashi smashing the bear creature off of his feet.

All of this activity had woken up several of the Amazons, including Ran and the other two, who had previously been conscious enough to try to make an escape and several others. One of them, whose name was Laura, wasn’t yet chained to the wall, and she stood up glaring at Franky, who had been the one to defeat her in battle. But then the keychain smacked into her chest, causing her eyes to widen in surprise.

“Don’t you go glaring just because you lost a fight. You Kuja Pirates aren’t supposed to be so weak that you’d be sore about losing the fight fair and square. Besides, looks as if we both lost today,” Franky said gruffly, smashing another zombie off its feet, then leaping over a spider mouse’s attempt to use its spider web on him. “Look after yourself and your crewmen, and if you want to throw down with me after, well, I’m hard-boiled to be willing to give you another beat down if you need it.”

Laura blushed for some reason, but fumbled with the key chain for a few moments, before unlocking herself. Rushing to the others, she tossed the keychain to Ran before using a hidden dagger to cut the rope from a few of the others grabbed the weapon to the fight.

Ran was lucky and found the right key to her chains the first time. Turning to the other conscious Kuja, she handed over the keychain, ordering them, "Grab up some weapons once you're freed, if you can find any and guard yourselves against the zombies. Knock them down, get their mouths open for these strangers and the Straw Hats. This morning's enemies are this afternoon's allies, I guess."

From where he was now fighting a recovered Kumashi, Franky nodded his head. "That's right! Super well stated!" Then he grunted as a blow from Kumashi got through his defenses, causing him to fall backward, grimacing as Kumashi's claws sliced across his face. Blood from the wound got into his eye blinding him and Kumashi moved around him, now trying to take advantage of that weakness.

Unfortunately, despite having gotten their recharge of cola, Franky was in no position to fight it his best. He was out of ammo and had used the last of his gas earlier to fry that one zombie during the first attempt at a breakout. And Marigold had basically pummeled him into submission, not even going for his back most of the time, simply hammering on his armored front.

Several more blows got through Franky's hasty attempt to redirect them, and he fell to his knees, groaning. But then Chopper was there, charging into Kumashi. Instead of trying to punch him, Chopper got in close and grabbed at Kumashi's mask, pulling it off. This revealed admittedly very nasty-looking teeth before Chopper thrust his other fist into the suddenly panicking Kumashi's mouth, smashing several teeth out. Inside the large bear's mouth, Chopper opened his fist, dropping a handful of salt inside Kumashi's mouth.

The stuffed animal's shadow disappeared, arising out of his mouth and heading upwards, and Chopper turned, standing next to Franky as more of the zombies tried to pile in. With Lola down, none of the other shadowless were strong enough to take on the zombies, and the ten Amazons still able to fight were being overwhelmed.

On the other hand, Brook was still fighting, dueling with two suits of armor that had suddenly begun moving from sconces near the entrance, showing they too were zombies. Yet even as he duelled with them, Brook had the time to ask a nearby Amazon, "Excuse me, young miss, but might I see your panties?"

"What are those again?" the young Amazon, named Aphelandra asked absentmindedly, ducking under a blow from a hammer-wielding zombie, kicking its feet out from under him, although the remaining slingers missed the chance to dump some salt into his mouth.

“I think the pink-haired bitch mentioned those,” Ran mused, grimacing as a zombie whose arm she had chopped off simply reconnected it and came back in. “Damn it, we aren’t doing enough damage!”

“Oh, those frilly things. Most of us don’t have any,” Aphelandra answered.

“Yohohohoho! Shock!” Brook laughed while somehow blood began to drip from his nose. “Why, that imagery is enough to make my heart go pitter pat. Even though I don’t have a heart, Yohohohoho! Skull Joke!”

Another one of the shadowless slingers went down, and several fled. The others only rallied by Brook shouting out, “Don’t run! This is our chance to be free, to see the sun again, to see pantyless Amazons! Yohohohoho! Do not waver!”

Unlike Franky and Brook, Chopper was almost fresh, able to fight them off easily, ignoring their attacks against him almost with impunity. His durability training with Luffy had made his Zoan-type durability way higher than it would otherwise have been regardless of type. But even as he thought, he was thinking. “Franky, can you load salt into your guns?”

“With my Fresh Gatling, yeah,” Franky answered. Chopper promptly tossed Franky his small bag, and Franky gratefully fell back, ripping at a nearby zombie’s clothing, tossing both to an unarmed Amazon before stepping forward once more to smash a furniture zombie into pieces. “Tear that into small sheets. Give me musket-ball sized packs of salt.”

The Amazon looks to protest, but Ran, moving forward to support Chopper, shouted at her, “Do it! Every time we knock one of these zombies down, it gets back up a second later!”

The fight was wild and all over the refrigeration chamber, with no attempt to form a solid defensive line made by either side, not that it would have worked in any event. Most of the surprise zombies bar the two armor suits were down by this point, along with some smaller, less combat-capable animal zombies. Dead or no, pinned under heavy weights or another zombie’s body was enough to stop some of them from moving. Most of the shadowless were down, but this proved to be good for the group, as the Kuja picked up their weapons, wielding them far better than the original owners.

Franky soon began to lay down fire, and more zombies fell, purified. Of course, the others kept fighting, but the tide began to turn with that. And soon, the last of the surprised zombies fell, having been dogpiled by several Amazons, its mouth was wrenched open so that Franky could fire into it with one of his last salt bullets.

The moment the last zombie fell, Chopper turned, ignoring the rest of them, racing towards Laki and Makino, shouting over his shoulder, “Franky, my bag!” He knew both women had kept bleeding throughout the fight, but he couldn’t have pulled away then without letting the zombies win.

Franky came up behind him, handing Chopper his bag as he saw him quickly began to work, shaking his head. Laki had taken wounds to the side of her chest and lower abdomen, her spine was bruised, and she had all the signs of a concussion on top of that. The wounds in the side of her chest and abdomen had bled freely before someone had slapped some very dirty, they were zombies, bandages on.

Cleaning the wounds, suturing them shut, and setting Laki's spine was all done as fast as Chopper could, the Amazons and even Franky looking on in shock as Chopper moved faster than any of them would ever have thought he could. Eventually, he leaned back, shaking his head. "Dammit! Laki's lost so much blood! I stopped her from losing more, and the wounds themselves I can heal. But she will need a lot of rest and care for this. I want to give her a blood transfusion, actually a lot. But neither of us is the same blood type. I don't know if we could do more for her without a transfusion even once we get back to the *Everlasting Resolve*."

While Chopper had gathered a lot of medical supplies, Water 7 didn't have many blood packs left after Aqua Laguna, and hadn't received any Blood Type AB- or even O type. And annoyingly, only Nami and Robin were O-type, the universal blood type, on the crew.

Meanwhile, Franky and the women looked at one another warily. After all, the Straw Hats had fought and killed at least a few of the Kuja pirates, who had been the ones to attack them in the first place while working with the selfsame zombies turned on them.

Looking at this, Lola shook his head. "Introductions, I think. My name's Lola. I know you all are the Kuja pirates and Straw Hats. That's about all I know. That, and that you Kujas were working with Moria, until he inevitably betrayed you."

Ran and some of the other more intelligent Amazon pirates shrugged their shoulders self-consciously. "We were warned about it, and even on the watch...but none of us were actually conscious when we were betrayed. We didn't think we would be beaten like that or even really weakened to the point the zombies could take advantage of it," she admitted.

"What, you're going to put the blame for this on us, for defending ourselves?" Franky scoffed, his head. "That's not cool, babe." Even as Ran scowled at being called a baby, Franky went on, thumping a thumb into his chest. "My name's Franky. I'm the bo'sun of the crew.

The bo'sun was a position given to the ship's carpenter and the individual who kept order among the rank-and-file seamen aboard a regular ship. Aboard a pirate ship, it just meant ship's carpenter.

"That was a great fight. You really showed a lot of strength and skill, even battered as you are," Lola said admiringly. "Please marry me."

"You're a fine woman, but I'm a little too super!" Franky answered promptly.

Shaking his head Franky turned away from Lola as her two men chortled at her latest rejection. But Lola seemed to take it in stride, just nodding her head. "And you too, Doctor! You were so strong, and you're obviously skilled too! Please marry me."

"Animal type Zoan, not human," Chopper answered crisply, almost not noticing as he finished working on Laki. With Laki in no danger of dying soon, he moved to the worst wounded Amazon pirate, grimacing. "Damn it, here's another that needs a blood transfusion. Which we don't have the resources for beyond the old-fashioned way of stabbing and repeatedly transfusing it one ampule at a time." Despite that, he went to work quickly, pulling out a bottle of yellowish medicine holding it up to a nearby Amazon. "If she wakes up, half her drink this."

That seemed to put the Amazons at ease, and the last tension in the women went out from them. A few even moved forward to help.

Once more, Lola took her rejection in stride, mentioning more important things. "We freed your first mate Zoro, and he went off after his swords. After getting some more of our allies, we decided to search for you all, although we weren't certain where they had taken so many prisoners."

Nodding at that, Franky looked around, belatedly realizing the same thing that Chopper realized before the battle began. "Our Navigator's missing."

Ran also looked around, scowling. "For some reason, we're missing three of our crew. I think I saw the zombies were keeping two of them dunked into the water for some reason."

"You mean they were Devil Fruit users?" Chopper asked, looking up from his work on his third patient. Her arm had been broken in several places, along with more than a few ribs, but he was able to set the bones. Later once they had her arm in a cast, he would see if she had internal injuries.

Devil Fruits? What are those? No, they are two of the three Gorgon Sisters, cursed by the monster Gorgon to turn into snakes and have snakelike bodies. It's a harrowing tale, but they have used the curse-given abilities to become two of the strongest Kuja alive," Ran answered in some confusion.

The two groups looked at one another in incomprehension for a moment, then Lola shook her head, waving one hand in the air in front of her face. "A lot of primitive natives talk about devil fruits like that. It's okay. Once they're out of the water, so long as they haven't drowned anyway, they'll be fine."

Ran and other Kuja all slumped in relief at that, but Lola spoke up before anyone else could. "Regardless, you're missing crewmates been taken away by one of the officers of Moria, Absalom. He intends to make her his bride."

“Say that sooner!” Franky and Chopper shouted, Chopper looking up from the work he was doing on one of the badly wounded Amazons. Luckily, he could shout and work at the same time, and the tincture he had just mixed was tabbed slowly and carefully on the woman’s wound before a new, much cleaner bandage was tied in place.

“That’s right, Absalom intends to marry her. I suppose the only good thing you can say about the lion man is that he isn’t going to do anything perverted to her before they get married, but he certainly isn’t going to listen to our objections beforehand. Or those of his zombies either,” Lola added, snickering at a private joke.

“That’s annoying as all hell! Still, a man doesn’t back down just because the going’s hard.” With that, Franky looked down at himself ruefully. “Absalom wouldn’t happen to be the one who can turn invisible, right?” *If so, he’s probably in even worse shape than I am. Hah!*

“That’s him,” Lola confirmed. “But I don’t think that either of you are ready to fight him.”

Chopper caught Franky’s eyes and shook his head, moving to his next patient. “Lola’s right. You’re in no shape to go anywhere, Franky. That stuffed animal zombie did a number on you, on top of the Amazons. It won’t take much to knock you out of action permanently. No, I’ll go after her. I’ll follow your scent until I find where Nami’s splits off.”

“Wait, we also need to find our missing crewmember. And we need to send a message a messenger to Hebihime-sama. She needs to know we were betrayed!”

Chopper shook his head, remembering what he had seen from a few windows. “She is fighting our captain who’s gone full lightning on her and the others.”

Franky snorted at that, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “Damn, I wish I could watch that! Would definitely be worth the price of admission, you know?”

The Amazons still looked a little confused, but Chopper looked over at Ran. “What’ is the name of the other missing crewmember?”

“Her name’s Marguerite. She’s a new member of the crew; we brought her along and twenty more warriors than normal because Hebihime-sama thought we might need the added help. Turns out we could’ve done with even more,” Laura snorted ruefully. “I’ll say this for you lot, you Straw Hat Pirates fight like the blazes.”

However, any further words were interrupted by a clacking noise from the entrance to the refrigeration area. Brook, who had been going around asking a few of the Amazons if he could see their panties, looked away from the tallest Amazon in the room, his eyeholes widening. “Oh, no. Not him!”

Chopper looked at him, then his own eyes widened while the others still looked confused until a zombie appeared in the doorway. There was only one zombie, but the sight of this particular zombie was enough for Chopper and Brook to both freeze in fear.

Shimotsuki Ryuma stepped forward, his blade still unsheathed from the earlier battle against Zoro held on one shoulder. "Yohohohoho What's this, what's this? Prisoners refusing to stay where they were put, doing still more damage to our forces? Yohohohoho. My word, but that will not do it all."

With that, Ryuma attacked, moving from the doorway to within striking distance of several of the Amazon women before they could even blink. Two of them, Aphelandra and Rindo, were sent flying by a kick that crashed into Cosmos, hurling her into the second, while two others found themselves gasping, doubled over from a single strike across their stomachs. Those strikes were from the flat of the blade but still cracked ribs, and as Ryuma stepped past them, the two previously almost uninjured Amazons collapsed to their knees and then onto their faces, completely out of it.

"It's not super at all to attack women like that before they have a chance to fight back," Franky bellowed, charging forwards, only for Ryuma to lash out towards him almost faster than Franky could track. He got one of his arms up to block it, but the forearm shield was cut almost to the bone as he howled.

Ryuma chuckled, looking at him thoughtfully. "Yohohohoho. My word, but you are made of stern stuff. I might have to actually try to slice you now."

He pulled his blade out, then world into an attack, and Brook leaped forward, but Chopper's voice stopped him. "C, Coward!"

The zombie samurai stopped, his head at his sword paused where it had just batted aside Brook's rapier like it was weightless. "And what precisely do you mean by that?" he asked coldly. "I recognize you as one of the two pirates that were with this one," he gestured to Brook, his tone a verbal sneer. "But do not think that just because you witnessed a duel dishonorably interfered with that, I am under any obligation to listen to you on points of honor."

"Y, you're a coward," Chopper shouted back, gathering everything Luffy had taught him about getting under your opponent's skin, as well as what Zoro had said at the time Tararan and Perona had interrupted the duel between Zoro and Ryuma. "I, if you weren't, you'd be looking for Zoro. The zombies all knew he escaped. They must've passed that news along!"

"That news did not reach my years," the zombie samurai intoned slowly although, his face had now twisted into a look of interest over his long scarf. Then he seemed to shake himself. "However, just because I wish to search for the two-sword user, does not mean I should not deal with all of you first."

Ran and the other remaining Amazons all gripped their weapons tightly while Franky stood back, grimly lifting his arms into a boxing position, ignoring the blood falling in rivulets from his forearm. *I might not have much left in the tank but cola, but I'll be damned to Davy Jones, if I don't go down swinging.*

"If you don't go now, you'll never get to fight him. He's gone after the giant, Oz. He might take your glory from you," Chopped tried desperately to talk the zombie down.

The zombie samurai cocked his head to one side, shaking his head. "Your attempts to use my sense of honor and desires for a true contest of blades against me will not work. All of you present a clear and present danger to this island and master Maria. I must deal with you before seeing to my own desires."

He lifted his blade and made to attack but stopped, staring at it as the black-edged blade thrummed and shifted in his grip. For a moment, Ryuma was silent, staring at it. "It would seem that the spirit of my sword was indeed awoken by that contest. And now, it demands I finish it." He tried again to move his sword to attack them, only to find Brook in his way, Franky lashing out with a blow from the side.

"But regardless of Shusui's desires, I am still its master!" With that, Ryuma lashed out, smashing Brook aside as if the singing swordsman was no threat whatsoever to him. As he flew, Brook reflected it was another sign that the zombie samurai had always held back against him in the past. That was galling, as was the knowledge that he didn't even register now, to the point where he the zombie samurai would threaten his Afro.

But Franky had a solution and shouted, "Chopper, salt!" as he and Lola raced forward. But Lola was smacked aside by a mere air pressure wave while Franky found himself backpedaling and dodging as the sword thrust in his direction. "Aubade Coup Droit!"

The attack, which created a highly compressed air thrust, barely missed Franky, blasting into the wall behind him and through it, creating a hole like a cannonball had struck it.

In response, Franky fired several bullets of salt towards the zombie samurai as Chopper charged forwards, transforming as he went. Using his Jumping Point, Chopper built up a lot of speed by bouncing around the ceiling and walls before launching himself forward. Midair, Chopper shifted into his Guard Point as he hurtled forward towards Ryuma. "Combi-Attack, Speed Point and Guard Point! Furry Cannonball!"

The zombie lashed out with a Yohohohoho, smashing Ran aside then thrusting his sword into the furry mass hurtling towards him. Instead of penetrating, though, his sword skittered over the round ball, cutting rivulets into Chopper's fur, but taking the sword out of position as Chopper barreled into him.

The impact took both of them out the doorway and into the opposite wall, which they smashed into creating a large indent, while Chopper transformed into his Heavy Point. Desperately he grabbed at Ryuma's arm, holding the blade against the wall with one hand while his other thrust towards the zombie's face, holding a fistful of salt. But a punch from the zombie left him stumbling, and then the sword user wrenched his arm out of Chopper's grip like it was nothing.

His sword flicked, and blood spurted from a cut in Chopper's side, but Chopper clamped down on his sword arm again, and a punch caught him in the face. Once more, Ryuma tore out of Chopper's grip, and a Strong Right from Franky sent him flying backward, but he rolled with it, coming up and flicking Chopper's blood off of his blade in the same motion he used to cut through the chain attaching Franky's hand to his wrist. "Yohohohoho, my word, but you are tough. I had thought to perhaps chop you almost in half with that blow, furry one."

Chopper realized suddenly that this guy must not have dealt with Zoan-type Devil Fruit users before. A human being his size might well have indeed been chopped in half by that blow. But Chopper could already feel his body slowly starting to heal and crouched down into a boxing stance, one hand disappearing into his pouch to pull out a Rumble Ball.

"Oy, Oy, do you think you'll be in any position to give Zoro anything like a good fight if you fight all of us?" Franky taunted, twirling the chain attached to his wrist above his head like a flail. He'd heard what Chopper had said before and moved to capitalize it with all the speed of someone who was a born taunter. "I don't think so. I wager the spirit of that blade of yours doesn't want to waste time, either."

The swordsman looked at them all, then pointed his blade at Chopper. For a moment, the fight going on within the zombie of the original body's desires and the shadow's devotion to Master Moria were clearly visible despite half the zombie's face being covered by a scarf. The sword seemed to thrum, making Chopper remember a few conversations Zoro and Luffy had about whether or not his swords could be technically called alive. Right now, Chopper felt he would come down on the alive side of that debate.

"Yohohohoho, calm down, my blade. I do not even know which direction Zoro and the giant went," he murmured, clearly torn.

"The last I saw of him, he was heading straight south from here!" Chopper interjected without prompting as Brook came out behind the two Straw Hats, leaning wearily against the side of the doorway. "Away from where the lightning storm hit."

"...That is indeed the direction I espied the giant in before," Ryuma muttered, scratching at his chin thoughtfully. That and the battering he had given them seemed to satisfy him. "Very well. None of you are in any shape to go anywhere any longer in any event. Stay here, try to defend yourselves from other zombies if you can, Yohohohoho. I have damaged you enough to

remove any threat you could pose to master Moria. That is enough. My own honor must now be assuaged.”

With that, he turned, stalking away. “And I do hope your swordsman can still give me a good fight in your stead, my furry fellow. If not, I will take it out of your hide. Yohohohoho.”

Behind him, Ran slumped, as did all of the others, including Brook, Lola and everyone else. “That was terrifying! No wonder he is known as the strongest zombie general,” Lola groaned. “If he was alive, I would ask him to marry me.”

Chopper just nodded wearily before turning back to head back to his remaining patients, as Franky patted him on the shoulder. “Good thinking. That was a super plan, talking him down like that, although what the heck was it all about? I went along with you, but it sounded as if you and Zoro had run into that bastard before.”

“We did. Ryuma and Zoro had a duel. Zoro was winning before they were interrupted by this giant spider-zombie and his followers. I just hope that we just didn’t pile more trouble on Zoro’s shoulders,” Chopper worried.

Franky shrugged. “I think First Mate-san would probably face that kind of trouble himself rather than know we were fighting a fight rightfully his.”

Shrugging as what was done could not be changed, Chopper spent another twenty minutes or so working on the prisoners who had been the worst injured, including Makino. The green-haired Straw Hat had several broken ribs, along with her jaw, which he would have to wire shut. For now, he simply injected her with a muscle relaxant and a bit of sleepy juice to keep her unconscious.

Once he was done with his original patients, Chopper looked over the others wounded by the zombie samurai’s rampage. None of them were in that good enough shape. Even Brook looked battered, although not quite as much as Franky. With that, and with Nami still missing, Chopper knew it was up to him. *I, I really don’t want to go out there again, especially on my own. But, but I wouldn’t be able to call myself a Straw Hat if I didn’t!*

Face firming, Chopper looked at Franky firmly. “I need to get moving. We need to find Nami. Although I don’t know how long it’s going to take me to find her scent...”

“Here,” one of the taller Amazons, a woman with frilly orange hair, said, holding out a small object, a tiny gold and ivory figurine. Her other arm was in a sling thanks to Chopper, although she had also pulled out a musket ball from her side. “This is Marguerite’s favorite belt ornament. She only wears it for special occasions but always has it on her. It should give you her scent, right? And it makes sense that she and your crewmate would be in the same place, right?”

“They are,” Lola confirmed from where she was leaning against a nearby wall, her head and arms both in new bandages. “Absalom, one of Moria’s followers, took them to marry them. Pity he’s not my type, or I’d go for him like my shadow does, and he’d have no need to.”

Sweatdrops abounded on everyone present who knew what a wedding was, and Chopper shivered. “Right, we need to stop that. I really, really don’t want to see Nami’s reaction if we don’t.”

As Franky laughed, Chopper took the small figurine, sniffing at it. Then, with Brook on his back, he moved off quickly, heading out the room and down the hall.

Franky and the other women all looked after him, shaking his head, their heads, and eventually, Cosmos asked, “Do you honestly think that strange raccoon creature is going to be able to...”

She was interrupted as in a burst of speed Chopper was back, bellowing at her, from the doorway, his teeth visibly sharpened into points as he roared, “I’m not a raccoon dammit! I am a reindeer! Why can’t people see the horns!” Then he was off once more, leaving Ran and the others gaping after him while Franky just laughed once more.

OOOOOOO

Racing after him, Luffy reflected that Kuma’s speed was insane, and as he closed, Luffy realized he was using an even faster version of the attack he had struck Luffy with during the first phase of their fight, which had sent him flying to crash into one of *Thriller Bark’s* masts, covering the distance in a few seconds. The Shichibukai was covered with a similar film of thick air, which made him act like a bullet, flashing through the air, far faster than any artillery round.

When Luffy caught him, Luffy could barely sense Eve behind him. *Fuck! Getting back might be really hard if I can’t stop him here, and it’s only because of my Kenbunshoku range that it’s possible at all.* A moment later, Luffy’s pursuit put him above the fleeing Shichibukai, at which point he lashed down with a blast of lightning that broke whatever defense the Shichibukai had in this strange transportation technique.

For a moment, Kuma stared up at him in shock, as the lightning crashed down into him, but he still thrust his hands upward, bouncing the blast away just before it could hit his body.

The two of them exchanged attacks for several minutes. Kuma was forced to use one arm to keep himself in the air. Still, he also used that hand to propel himself in random directions so fast it looked like he too could teleport. If not for Luffy’s own speed, that might have been enough to turn the tide. But the strain of this technique was obvious. Luffy could hear the sound of his body straining away, grinding noises, shrieks and hisses coming from Kuma every time he moved thanks to the damage he had taken. Luffy could also hear a series of sonic booms as Kuma moved, which probably would also be causing the cyborg issues.

So, while Kuma could only launch attacks occasionally, his defense was insane. Like before, Kuma seemed able to use his experience and his short-range hopping to keep up with Luffy's ability to an incredible degree.

It wouldn't have saved him in the long run even back on *Thriller Bark*, though. Luffy didn't have time to waste, and here, there was an obvious hole in Kuma's defense: attacks from below. *The guy can't bend so well, and up here, his one remaining leg is next to useless.*

"Kiten Pack!" Luffy bellowed, flashing around Kuma and above him. Every time he stopped, he sent a wolf-shaped lightning monster towards Kuma. The shapes distorted as Kuma struck them, but Luffy had flashed down to a new position by the time the third one was dealt with.

From directly below Kuma, Luffy reached up to wrap his hands around Kuma's feet. "Vari!" Kuma doubled over, tried to reach him, used one hand to fling the two of them through the air while the other sent shots of compressed air down towards Luffy. But Luffy held on, letting the pressure shots simply go through him as he continued to power his attack, overloading whatever system within the cyborg allowed Kuma to absorb Luffy's lightning.

There was a final 'BEWWWWOOOooooooooFZZKK' sound, and some kind of panel at the back of the cyborg exploded.

But Luffy's attacks didn't let up even as air pressure attacks crashed through his body, dissipating everything but his hands clamped around Kuma's feet. And still sending hundreds of thousands of volts through the Shichibukai.

Everything from Kuma's waist and down failed at that point. Bits of metal slagged, molten hot bits falling into the ocean far below, while other parts just exploded. As this happened, Kuma bellowed as what little bit of his humanity was left was charred and seared to the bone, along with the last of his clothing.

And yet, to Luffy's astonishment, the cyborg was still able to think. Even as he fell down towards the distant ocean, He put his hands together, a sphere of air appearing there, becoming condensed before being shot out towards where Luffy had just appeared. "Ursus Shock!"

It wasn't even as large as Kuma had used against Sanji. Still, the compressed air explosion blasted all around Kuma, and Luffy's body was forced into an incorporeal form once more as a new sun appeared for just a second over the ocean. But he reformed quickly and watched as Kuma tried to get away once more, using both of his hands to thrust out and away from *Thriller Bark* further. "No, you fucking don't!"

Under cover of a single overpowered strike that Kuma bounced away, a Busoshoku clad foot crashed into Kuma, bursting his travel technique, hurling him down towards the water. It

also heavily dented the extra-thick metal covering Kuma's chest, and it was only with difficulty that Kuma righted himself.

Kuma's ability to move and fight was now completely curtailed. Much of his cyborg body was either slagged or just unresponsive, and although his arms still worked thanks to the remnants of his electrical absorption system, it was obvious where this fight was going to go. *Combat efficiency down to twenty-three percent, chance to escape, ten percent and dropping. Conclusion: I must try to talk my way out of this.*

"Wait!" he shouted. "I call for a parley! In the name of Davy Jones, I declare parley!"

Luffy snarled, but some parts of being a pirate were indisputable, and Kuma had used the word parlay. According to what Shanks told Luffy, that meant something to pirates, even in the middle of a battle. "Talk quickly, and it better be fucking good!" Luffy growled.

"I wish for you to let me go. I heard you speak to Boa Hancock about keeping a low profile. I can make up a story, tell the World Government that the three of us fell to infighting, and you passed us by. They knew you would pass through the Florian Triangle, but we could simply say we missed you."

"No dice." Luffy shot that down quickly, gesturing at Kuma's body. "Your body's injuries wouldn't match anything Boa or Moria could do to you. And to plan this whole thing out and not know that Moria would definitely run into me makes no sense. Besides, you'd be asking me to trust the word of the one Shichibukai who is known to be loyal to the WeeGee."

Seeing that opening, Kuma decided to go all in. "Incorrect. My loyalty is not to the World Government as you might believe. I have been acting as their dog for a purpose. In fact, I am a member of Dragon's Revolutionary army. My infiltration was on orders from them." Kuma did have to admit though that Luffy had a point about the damages Kuma had taken.

"You expect me to believe that?!" Luffy snorted harshly. "Keep dreaming."

"I know your father, Monkey D. Dragon," Kuma said, holding up a hand, his arm creaking and groaning the song of tortured metal as he did so. "He gave me this mission. I was to infiltrate the World Government. I was to become close to their greatest science, Dr. Vegapunk. He is the one who remade me to be like this. I cannot tell you how important my mission is for the revolutionaries. But I have given them..."

"I don't fucking care about the revolution," Luffy snarled as he interrupted Kuma once more. "And just because you know my father isn't proof anyway. What about all the shit you're supposed to have done both before and after becoming a Shichibukai? And you attacked my crew! You intended to take my head and wipe my friends out. You did so because the WeeGee told you to. Look me in the eyes, Kuma, and tell me ya wouldn't have wiped out my crew."

Kuma couldn't say that. His cover as a Shichibukai was too important. If he had been able to, he would have tried to not do so but it would always be a possibility, and he stated so before adding, "The one I fought is still alive, as you said. I could easily have killed him. As for proof of my affiliation, I... am afraid that anything I said would be well out of date."

Scoffing, Luffy rolled his eyes as if to say 'see!?' before Kuma interjected further, while a cascade of errors hit his mind. even using his Devil Fruit to bounce in place like this was putting more strain on his already ruined body. "As for the rumors about me, many of them are not true, propagated by the Revolutionaries to let me seem powerful enough to become a Shichibukai. The rest were ordered by the World Government which I obeyed to keep my cover, or before that against World Government-allied lands."

"You say that as if it makes it better, 'oh I was following orders'," Luffy scoffed, spitting to one side. *What the fuck is up with people thinking that makes it all better?* "But, fine, say I believe you there. It's true you could have killed Sanji at least. But even if I believe that and the whole Revolutionary thing, we come back to the point your damage doesn't match what either Boa or Moria could cause. Are you telling me that you would be able to talk your way out of that?"

Kuma slowly thought about this for a moment, but when it came right down to it he could not. "No. Your being a logia user is out of the bag. I, one bit of mental programming Vegapunk gave me already is to report the usage of logia powers. If asked in the correct manner, your powers would indeed come out. In that case, I would have to come up with another story. Perhaps we had our fight interrupted by the previous Logia user? Or perhaps we slew you despite it..."

"You didn't read my full file then," Luffy interrupted, although his voice lacked any heat now as he remembered where that file came from. *I knew ya swore an oath, Hina, but this still hurts.* "I killed Enel. No. If I let you go and you return to the World Government, my secret will be out, and my crew will be hounded by the WeeGee to the point where, no matter how powerful I am, I couldn't protect them."

"I do not think that could happen quickly," Kuma attempted to trying to come up with something that could keep both his mission going and appease Luffy. *Damn it, I know that there is some secret about the boy, Dragon and Ivankov, but they never shared it with me. And I doubt he has any memories of when he was a baby, so there's nothing I can tell to even convince him I'm a revolutionary!*

Perhaps if I knew what the World Government was planning, why they were going to recall us after this mission, I would have some information at least to barter with. Unlike Boa Hancock, Kuma hadn't tried to haggle about her price for this mission and had no knowledge just yet about Fire Fist Ace's capture or the Marine's plans to use that capture and spark a war with Whitebeard on their terms. Which meant essentially, that to Luffy, letting him go had little upside to the pirate captain.

Nodding grimly, Luffy held up his hand, a lightning attack already forming behind him in the form of a wolf. “Which means that you’re asking me to take you solely on your word that you are a revolutionary. But even if I do that, I’d have to trust that letting you go, letting you continue this mission of yours, would be worth the trouble letting you go would cause my crew in the short term. As a pirate captain, that isn’t something I can afford to do, even if I did believe you.”

“And if by killing me, you make an enemy of your father?” Kuma demanded, grasping at straws now. *Is, is this where my story ends? From King to revolutionary to pirate, and then Shichibukai infiltrator and now my death to this young upstart?* Even without his glands working, that thought infuriated and saddened Kuma in equal measure.

Luffy shrugged, but while his voice was light, his eyes were hard as he stared back at Kuma, knowing this was an execution now, and not a fight. But it had to be done. “Man, I know he’s my sperm donor, but we’ve only spoken like three times at most, and twice was way in the past. As for making another enemy, the moment I decided I would be Pirate King, I knew I would become the enemy of practically everyone in the world. What’s one more enemy?”

Unlike Hancock, who Luffy would possibly need alive to reverse the effect of her power on Robin, Luffy didn’t think either of the other Shichibukai had anything he was interested in. And frankly, while Luffy believed some of what Kuma had said, that didn’t mean the asshole hadn’t done horrible things, he’d only done it under orders instead to get his rocks off. That was just as bad in his opinion.

“This parlay,” Luffy finished formally, “is over!” Without another word, Luffy launched one large-scale attack after another towards the battered cyborg.

Kuma batted every attack aside with one hand, size mattering nothing to his abilities but was hit by a second attack from the side even as he tried desperately to bring his palm around. Without his waist and legs, he couldn’t even turn without using one of his arms to do so.

The next instant, Luffy had grabbed the back of Kuma’s neck from behind. Lightning arcing through his fingers and into Kuma’s spine, shorting out everything that remained active within his body, still more bits of his armor sloughing off in molten droplets.

Luffy cut off his attack, his body turning solid as he bounced in the air via Geppo, still holding Kuma’s neck. “For what it’s worth, ya fought well,” he announced, bowing his head respectfully even though Kuma couldn’t see it. “But I couldn’t let you go. Sorry, but it looks like my Old Man’s going to have to find someone else to perform whatever job you said you were doing.”

“I, I, I...” Kuma stumbled, blood and oil pouring out of his mouth, unable to form words. As he felt his body start to shut down from the neck down, memories flooded through him, of happy times with Ivankov, his fellow king, of the time he met Dragon and joined the Revolution,

of the pain he went through to become the first Pacifista. Of how angry he had been to hear half the Pacifistas would be based on Doberman instead of him. Of the operations which had only recently begun to remove his free will.

He wanted to say something, to create some final words, to convey his understanding of Luffy's choice maybe, or perhaps to bemoan his fate. But no real words could come to Kuma now. "I, I, I..."

To Luffy, the tone of Kuma's voice was totally like that of a robot now, and he shook his head. Then his other hand came up, clad in a new technique he'd made. It wasn't so much a single attack as to lightning bolts basically forced into a corkscrew shape, constantly twirling around. "Raiuzu (Lightning Vortex)!"

The attack hammered home, not so much shorting out what little remained active in Kuma's body as melting its way through. As it did, the light finally left the cyborg's one remaining eye, the other having exploded back on Thriller Bark. Luffy let go and then watched as Kuma's body fall down, down to the water far below. It barely made a splash as it hit, the blood and oil making a tiny puddle before the blood too was gone, leaving only the tiny bit of oil to mark Kuma's watery grave.

Luffy stood there a moment, staring down at that bit of oil, before turning away. Closing his eyes, he tried to use his Kenbunshoku to sense where Thriller Bark was, racing back the way he had come.

OOOOOOO

How long Ozoro had been trudging back inland for he didn't know, but several times Hildon had to order him to turn around, changing direction on him. While Ozoro didn't argue about it, that still slowed them down. Then their march was interrupted by a voice bellowing "There you are!"

Ozoro looked down and saw someone standing in front of him, about half the size of his foot, looking up at Ozoro with a challenge on his face. "You. That bastard Moria gave you my shadow. I want it back."

As Ozoro watched, the little man pulled out a bandana, slipping it on his head right over his eyes and then unsheathed two blades he carried at his side. "I challenge you!"

Ozoro blinked, then the words registered, and his mouth twisted into a smirk, a truly horrifying expression considering his scared and tusks. But the imperative of serving Master Moria flashed across his head, and his face grew slack before he shook his head. "As a swordsman, I would accept your challenge, but I must hurry back to my master. As for me having your shadow or whatever, I've never even..."

“Wait!” Hilton shouted, getting Ozoro’s attention and the massive giant turned slightly to look at the creature with his one eye. He watched as Hilton gestured down at one of Ozoro’s arms. “Look at your left arm.”

Confused, Ozoro lifted his hand up to stare at his forearm. On it were a series of bounty posters.

“That is one of the Straw Hats. They are master Moria’s enemies! If you take him down, master Moria will be pleased,” Hildon intoned, a wicked grin appearing on his fat face.

“Strange to think that the master would have trouble with such small people, but all right. Two birds with one stone then,” Zoro bellowed, throwing his arms upwards along with his makeshift blades. “I can both accept your challenge and please my master. This is a good day!”

Staring up at him, it didn’t take any great leap of logic for Zoro to know that he couldn’t match the monster giant’s strength. *And I can’t assume he’ll fight in any way like me or other sword users. He’s too big for precise strikes or any real semblance of control. Big, sweeping blows, but I shouldn’t underestimate the bastard’s speed either. Still, my own speed and ability to dodge might be my greatest asset here.*

With that, Zoro charged, using his limited ability with Geppo to bounce around the giant, lashing out with small probing Thirty-Six Pound Cannon strikes. He watched as the giant deflected them with wide sweeps of his arms, bringing his ‘blades’ up and around in a blow toward Zoro, which shattered the ground as they hit. Then Zoro was on his arm, racing up it, lashing out with another attack. “Seventy-two Pound Cannon!”

The attack slammed into Ozoro’s chest at point-blank range, causing him to stagger, but he moved with the strike, taking two giant-sized steps back. He then brought down his sword in a straight thrust towards Zoro’s position, the air whirling around it as the strike came in, faster than anything that size had a right to move. The next second the other blade crashed down where Zoro had leaped to dodge the first strike.

Fuck he really is faster than you’d think! Grimacing, Zoro coated his blades with black armor, desperately redirecting the Zombie’s strike, Wado and Sandai sending up an unholy shriek as they met the rough pig iron of the two clubs Ozoro was using as swords.

Zoro’s grunt of effort added to the noise, but he was able to slide the blade away. Using that momentum to twirl into another attack, Zoro launched a whirlwind towards Ozoro. A flat disk of spinning, roiling air with a cutting edge nearly hit Ozoro in the knee.

Leaping into the air, Ozoro let the attack pass below him before thrusting down with his blades. “Giant Reversed Ushi Bari!”

But Zoro moved backward, then forward, racing upwards on the blade itself, shouting out, "A weapon so blunt is unworthy of being called a sword!" His next attack targeted Ozoro's fingers, but Ozoro pulled back enough that the attack hit Ozoro's sword in that hand. Then Ozoro's other sword came around, so fast that Zoro had to block it with his own, rather than dodge once more.

"Ghhh!" Zoro grunted at the impact and then was hurled through the air to bounce along the ground. The impact on the ground created a small crater bouncing along a few times before he could flip and get his legs under him again.

Woozily, Zoro pushed to his feet, but that one strike had hit him harder than anything he'd felt, even against Rob Lucci. *Hell, Luffy hasn't hit me that hard in practice!* "Right, whatever else, don't get hit. No wonder the pigtailed bastard always emphasizes speed over everything else. If you can run into something like this in this world, then dodging's is all you can do."

Even as he spoke, Zoro charged forwards, lashing out with another attack at Ozoro's feet. That forced Ozoro into the air, but midair, Ozoro replied in kind, lashing out with his own attack. "Seventy-Two Pound Giant Cannon Blast!"

Zoro grimaced, but this attack was so wide and tall it left him only two choices. Reply in kind and try to achieve something useful, or use Busoshoku to just take it. For Zoro, that was no choice. "COME!" he bellowed before pushing his Busoshoku into his blades once more before launching a long-range attack himself. "Seventy-Two Pound Enhanced Cannon!"

The attack flashed out from Zoro's blades, a much larger attack than normal, slamming into the blast of condensed air and energy coming towards him. The two attacks, both of a similar type, fought for a moment. And though Zoro's attack lost quickly, it gained him enough time to get out of the range of Ozoro's strike. Using Geppo, he escaped to one side, then dashed forward through the air to put himself almost at equal height to Ozoro's face, lashing out with a strike from the side. "Take this!"

Once more, the creature showed a preternatural level of speed for something that huge, dodging at the last instant so much so that only one of its tusks was sliced off. But Zoro twisted into another attack, lashing out and downward with his blades, sending two more long-range attacks into the creature's face before he could bring up his blades. One monstrous club blocked the attack, the shriek of iron and hurricane winds meeting filling the world.

In the same moment, Ozoro's other blade thrust out hard for Zoro, forcing him away. That thrust whirled into a slice, and it was the giant's turn to twirl into his own saw-bladed assault. "Giant Tatsu Maki!"

The wind grabbed Zoro out of the air, hurling him around as if Luffy had just used his hurricane-creating technique on him. But this time, when Zoro eventually struck the ground, he

was covered with Busoshoku, and though the crater was even larger and deeper, he stepped out of it unscathed.

Ozoro looked at him thoughtfully, nodding his head. "You're quite durable."

"And you're quite fast for your size," Zoro grunted, releasing his Busoshoku except around his swords to conserve his reserves. *Fuck me, but that giant bastard is tough and too damn strong. I can't afford to get hit again, even by a Tatsu Maki.*

The two of them stared at one another, taking up a similar stance, one sword held below, the other high, presenting their sides, staring at one another. It should have been laughable, but Hildon, watching on from where he clung for dear life in Ozoro's hair, had to gulp at the tension in the air. *Monsters, they're both monsters!! How can someone so small keep fighting so well?*

Hands clenched around hilts and muscles, both living and dead, tensed, but before they could join, a new voice interrupted the proceedings. "Hold Ozoro. I have a prior engagement with this warrior."

As Ozoro hesitated, pulling out of his stance, Zoro twisted around to stare at the voice, his face tightening both in concern and anticipation as he stared at Ryuma. "Are you here to hand me your sword, samurai?"

Having moved to where he could see the giant in the distance, Ryuma now came out of the wasteland that had previously been a forest, his traditional garb fluttering in the wind that was still disturbed from Ozoro's latest attack. "Yohohohoho. You know that is not going to happen. You might have been winning, but that is a far cry from having won., I will not relinquish Shusui until thoroughly defeated. Such is my bushido."

Hearing the term, Zoro suddenly snorted, laughing quietly as he remembered the times Vivi had called him Mr. Bushido before becoming serious, hoping that some part of his sense of honor still existed in the giant. "Well?" he grunted, looking up at his previous target.

To his surprise and the watching Hildon's shock, Ozoro stared at the two normal-sized swordsmen, twitching in place for several minutes, then he relented, resting his blades tip first into the ground to either side of him. "I, I will not get in the way of this zombie's duel with you, Roronoa Zoro. It would be a dishonorable act. Further, teaming up to attack you would be unworthy of a swordsman."

Breathing thanks to his own damn stubbornness and pride Zoro nodded, the nod almost a bow, then he looked over to zombie swordsman. "In that case, I am perfectly prepared to restart our duel," Zoro said formally.

“Wh, what in the world? What are you doing!?” Hildon nearly shrieked, flying out of Ozoro’s hair to land, handing tom the tip of one of his ears to scream directly into the giant’s ear. “You two should gang up on him. You both serve master Moria. There is no purpose in this, this grandstanding!”

“It is not grandstanding,” Ryuma roared. “Curse you, Hildon! I was denied my duel once. I will not have you take it from me this time!”

With that, the samurai charged forward, going blade to blade with Zoro. But Zoro had learned from the last time. The sheer hardness of Ryuma’s sword meant that he could literally shatter Zoro’s blades if he wasn’t careful. So both were covered in Busoshoku, their spirits merged with his, the bloodlust of the demon sword rising within as it hadn’t when faced with Ozoro’s bastardized blades. Even Wado Ichimonji roused itself, like a regal matron slowly deciding that a young upstart should be struck down.

As he felt his swords’ spirits, Zoro grinned, pushing the zombie swordsman back before twisting around and into an attack launching it towards Ozoro. He too had moved forward, hesitantly raising his makeshift blades to join the battle on Hildon’s repeated use of the words ‘Master Moria commands,’ “Toro Nagashi!”

He then flipped up and over a strike from the zombie swordsman before battering aside a series of attacks from him. Ryuma’s blade then darted forward in a series of super-quick strikes as the bastard pushed forward, eager to break Zoro’s swords, the target for this attack. “Curse you, Ozoro. This is my fight! Prelude: Au Fer.”

As he retreated and dodged through these attacks and a jab from Ozoro’s swords, Zoro found himself hard-pressed. However, the memory of what Ryuma’s blade had done to his own, the feel of his swords groaning in pain, gave Zoro an idea.

When Ozoro’s next blade strike came towards him, he leaped up over it, followed by Ryuma. “Hyokindama!” The attack spun Zoro around like a top, pushing Ryuma’s attacks aside, although the zombie was able to follow him up onto Ozoro’s arm despite that.

The two of them dueled on top of the blade for a time before the other sword flicked towards them, causing both to leap away. But Zoro dodged a strike from Ryuma’s blade by the skin of his teeth, thrusting downward, the image of some kind of demon appearing momentarily behind him. “Enbima Yonezu Oni Giri!”

Covered with Busoshoku and covered further by an air pressure wave that acted more like a spear thrust than a spinning hurricane, Zoro’s swords crashed down into Ozoro’s, slicing straight through in several places. “Nothing in this world cannot be cut by a swordsman of sufficient skill!”

“Gahh! You bastard, do you have any idea how hard it is to find anything that is even sword-like for someone my size!?” Ozoro bellowed, tossing the useless sword aside, taking his one remaining sword in both hands, holding it crossways to his body.

However, this attack cost Zoro. “Gavotte Bond en Avant!”

The blow crashed into Zoro’s side, sending him tumbling through the air, grunting in pain, even as his Busoshoku took the strike, having just barely called upon it in time. If he hadn’t, the attack could well have pierced Zoro’s side and finished the fight.

As it was, Zoro rolled with the strike, then was forced to roll further away as Ozoro attacked. “Modified Single Sword Strike, Ground Cleaver!”

The strike hit the ground where Zoro had been a moment ago, while Zoro bounced into the air, hurling himself aside, while behind him, the strike carved a canyon down into the island practically all the way through the rock and stone, the bottom disappearing in darkness, the strike continuing out of sight. While the attack didn’t hit Zoro, the wind of it tossed him away, breaking his Geppo and sending him crashing to the earth.

But the strike also caught Ryuma in a similar manner, causing him to shout in fury. “Blast it, Ozoro, watch what you are doing! This is why I never fight with others!”

Yet even as he complained, the undead samurai still attacked. Still on his knees, Zoro couldn’t dodge or block all his attacks, and one strike caught Zoro along the leg. Blood flowed from the cut, and Zoro fell to his side, but rolled with it, then kicked himself upwards into the air, using one leg for a moment to gain some distance via Geppo. Looking down at his leg, he saw that the wound wasn’t deadly, just bleeding heavily from the lower leg. He grinned, shaking his head. *Nothing I’m not used to, then.*

At that point, Ozoro attacked once more. No enhanced attack this time, Ozoro simply leaped into the air, crossing the distance between his previous position and the two fighting swordsmen, bringing his sword down in a vicious strike. “Die, Roronoa Zoro!”

“You idiot!” Hildon shrieked. “If you kill him, your shadow will die too!”

Ozoro was beyond hearing at this point. Humiliated by having one of his ‘blades’ destroyed, and Zoro seemingly turning his full attention on Ryuma, Ozoro wanted to crush Zoro entirely, too angry to even use one of his many techniques.

Seeing this, Zoro was forced to defend himself once more, ducking to the side as Busoshoku covered his body. Ozoro’s sword then flicked to the side, but leaping up to meet the attack, Zoro deadened much of its force, letting the rest of the force hurl him high into the air.

“Yohohohoho! Although it pains me to strike in such a manner, I must obey my lord. Goodbye, Roronoa Zoro! Hanauta Sancho: Yahazu Giri!” With that, Ryuma’s blade seemed to disappear, flashing forward so fast that even Zoro couldn’t follow it, the sound of hummingbirds filling the air as he thrust forward, modifying Brook’s original attack into multiple strikes on the fly.

Zoro saw this coming and also saw Ozoro bringing up his blade once more. But instead of trying to dodge them, Zoro bellowed out his own attack, as his willpower, his raw ki, burst into flame along his blade. “Ittouryu: Hiryuu Kaen (Flying Dragon: Fire Blaze)!”

The descending blow sliced into Ozoro’s second blade, cutting the iron in several places tossing the pieces in every direction. As Ozoro stumbled, Ryuma’s attack hit the assault from Zoro and the zombie’s attack burst, completely overcome. Zoro’s attack continued as he landed in front of Ryuma. The strike crashed into him, setting him on fire and causing the zombie to stumble backward, the blue flame covering his body.

“Damn you, Roronoa! Again, you deprive me of my blade!” Ozoro roared, but his voice fell away, and he paused, both Ozoro and his passenger Hildon staring at the flaming form of the samurai zombie.

The undead samurai stared down at the flames licking all over his body, then across at Zoro, feeling his body failing under him. “There it is. There it is, the honorable death I had hoped for. This Shusui will find a true master in you. I trust you to not sully it with defeat as I have.”

With that, he tossed the blade towards Zoro, who caught it by the sheath, bowing. “I will honor this blade in life as you have in death.”

Ryuma nodded back, then stared up at the foggy sky above. “Yohohohoho. The world truly is vast. I truly think I would have liked to meet you when I was alive, Santoryu user. Farewell...”

With that, his shadow left the zombie’s body, which slumped lifeless to the ground.

For a second, Zoro just watched the body, his eyes flicking between it and the rapidly retreating shadow, hurtling unstopably back to its previous owner. Then he stared down at his new blade, shaking his head. “Let’s call this a tie then, Samurai of Wano...”

With his farewells given to the spirit of the dead swordsman, Zoro turned to Ozoro, clenching Wado Ichimonji’s hilt in his mouth as he pulled Shusui out of its sheathe with his dominant hand, Sandai Kitetsu in the other. Holding three blades once more, Zoro grinned around Wado’s hilt toward Ozoro, who crouched, his hands out to either side. “Heh, don’t worry, my shadow. Soon, you’ll be back with me, and together we will continue our journey to our dreams. To become the strongest swordsman in the world!”

With that, he brought the swords in his hands together, placing one hilt against the other at an angle like a pinwheel. This was the stand for one of Santoryu's most powerful attack: Three Thousand Worlds. Zoro felt it fitting to use such a strike as his first introduction to Shusui.

But before Zoro could attack the extremely-angry-looking Ozoro, a voice interrupted them. "Having trouble?"

Hearing that voice, Zoro groaned, knowing who it was that had just arrived on the scene. *Well, fuck my life! This is about to go from doable to so totally not, it isn't even funny.* He turned, bringing the speaker, as Moria arrived on the scene from a slightly different direction than the zombie samurai. Behind him, Boa Hancock came, both of them looking a little out of breath as if they had run here, but that didn't matter. They certainly looked as if they hadn't yet been taken care of by his captain.

Gathering his courage, Zoro scoffed, spitting to one side. "Well, it looks as if the two of you are good at running away at least." He pointed Wado Ichimonji at the woman, frowning. "Moria, I recognize, but who are you?" *Although he looks like he took some enhancement pills or something since he took my shadow. What the hell is going on there?*

A part of him thought she looked extremely attractive, but that was a small, insignificant thought as Zoro realized he was in for the fight of his life. *Although, why the heck is she wearing Luffy's shirt? Weird.*

"A, arrogant oaf!" Boa replied, staring down her nose at him so hard that she was actually looking at the sky. "I am the Pirate Empress, Boa Hancock, Shichibukai!"

Well fuck. Zoro gritted his teeth as he realized that the woman was one of the two Shichibukai Perona had mentioned had joined forces with Moria. He glanced back toward Moria, only to stop as Moria had seemingly disappeared. "What the, where did..."

"Kishishishishi, over here, Pirate Hunter," a taunting voice intoned.

The voice came from Ozoro's position. No, Zoro realized, it came from the giant himself, and Ozoro blinked in surprise, staring down at his stomach. "What in the..."

As the others watched, a curtain that had previously been covering a portion of Ozoro's stomach pulled aside, revealing a small square box, like a cockpit in a giant robot. There sat Moria, his form nearly obscured in the shadows within. "Kishishishishi! Behold, my greatest creation, Shadow Robot Ozoro!"

Ozoro stared down at his stomach, lifting a finger to poke at the cockpit area until Moria smacked his finger away. "Master... this is so cool."

"I gotta say, that is pretty cool," Zoro admitted as if it pained him to do so.

"Isn't it? Kishishishishi! I rather liked the idea when Hogback suggested it, though I didn't think I'd be able to try it out in battle so quickly," Moria answered, his eagerness to crush Zoro in abeyance for a moment.

"... I don't see the appeal," Hancock shook her head, staring at the tableau with a deadpan expression.

Then Moria shouted a command and Ozoro moved his arms. From those arms, shadows roiled, forming into purple and black shadow swords. But like Moria's shadow, these were clearly very solid. A fact proved a second later as he brought them down towards Zoro. Zoro dodged it, but the strikes to the ground created a furrow in the ground. At the same time, Boa sent a Mero Mero Beam the swordsman's way.

With that, the battle was joined once more, with Zoro fully on the defensive now, retreating in front of the two Shichibukai and the monster giant. *Oh, this is not going to be fun at all!!*

OOOOOOO

At the same time Zoro found Ozoro, the wedding march began to play in the small church that was part of the sprawling segment of *Thriller Bark* that led to and from the docks at the back of the island portion of the massive ship. In front of the zombie performing the ceremony who wore a priest outfit for some odd reason that Absalom had never looked into too hard, Absalom now stood, still wearing his normal clothing. There hadn't been any time for him to try and find a tuxedo, and frankly, there was no point.

Besides, I think trying to get up to my room and back might well kill me, he thought, grimacing at the pain he was still in. Those fuckers really did a number on me! Still, I won in the end!

As the wedding march played, the proof of Absalom's victory was being slowly brought down the aisle. They should've been walking, Absalom knew, but having two of the zombies basically move them like this was the best he was going to get. As he watched, Absalom's eyes turned into hearts. "Angels, angels from heaven!!!"

Both women wore white, but the cut of the dresses was different, despite the need for haste that the tailor had labored under. The Straw Hat's Cat Burglar wore a somewhat modest outfit. It was a long dress coming down to just above her ankles which hugged her bodice and stomach tightly, the chest area above covered by white lace, some portions thinner than others creating a butterfly pattern. On the side, it had slits taken out of the dress, covered up in further lace, which gave it a slightly more alluring look. But all in all, Nami looked like an angel,

as Absalom had said, and he stared at her veil-covered face, as she was carried forward first in line.

As she was moved into position, his gaze shifted to the blonde, Marguerite. Unlike Nami, her dress was cut short, coming up to only just below her knees, showing off two magnificent legs. Her dress had a portion cut out over her stomach in a diamond pattern, showing her navel and extremely toned stomach before rising to cover her chest completely, only showing a tiny hint of décolletage right below her throat. Marguerite also wore long fingerless gloves that came up to above her elbow and had a flower stuck in her hair alongside her veil.

“What are these styles called?” Absalom whispered to the tailor nearby, who was standing nearby.

“Traditional and innocent tomboy, I believe, Lord Absalom,” that worthy replied, his jaw twitching into an amused smile. With the stitches on his face, that really wasn’t a good look for the little zombie, but then again, nothing would be.

“Well-chosen! Well-chosen!” Absalom gave him two huge thumbs up, then turned back to the ceremony, desperately sniffing, stopping any blood from leaking out his nose.

He turned, looking at the priest, nodding his head for first fiercely. That worthy flipped open the page of the Bible that was on his pulpit and then began. “We are gathered here to witness the union in holy matrimony between Lord Absalom and his chosen brides, Marguerite of the Amazons and Nami of the Straw...”

“I object!” shouted a female voice as the wall leading toward the forest shattered. The zombie Lola stood there in all of her wedding dress-clad-warthog glory, swords in her hand, and death in her eyes. “You bastard Absalom! How dare you fall for these floozy’s when you have me! I’ll kill them!”

“I wasn’t even to that part yet...” the priest mumbled.

Absalom didn’t notice, too busy shouting, “Lola!” as the warthog-bodied general zombie charged forwards. He tried to aim his bazooka, only to remember that he had taken it off earlier, the damn thing being too heavy thanks to his wounds for him to carry willingly.

He gasped in shock as Lola lunged past him, moving to slice his two brides to pieces. Only the zombies holding them in place saved both women’s lives. One of them quickly ducked under the blow dragging Nami with him. The other one danced aside, able to get away entirely by jumping over one of the pews.

Marguerite woke up as her foot smacked into the top of the pew hard enough to leave a bruise, groaning as she muttered, “OW, what in the world? What is going on here?” She then

looked down at herself, her eyes widening. “What in the world in my wearing! How is someone supposed to fight in this?”

She tried to struggle in the zombie’s grip but having been hurt so much during the battle before, Marguerite could not break the grip around her waist and arms. “Let me go! Let me go! Hebihime-sama will kill you all for this!”

“You speak as if I’m going to kill you, darling,” Absalom said, shaking his head as Lola paused in her rampage to snarl at the blonde. “The truth is nothing is going to happen to you. No, you are here to take part in a secret ceremony, a ceremony that happens between a man and a woman.”

Marguerite was one of the newer members of the Kuja Pirates. As such, she’d had no interaction with men before coming on this mission. Marguerite had no idea about marriage either, the institution not existing among her people. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“He’s talking about the holy wedding, matrimony, the most important thing in a woman’s life, you harlot! And you, with your curves and your pretty face, you seduced my Absalom! That position is mine!” Lola shouted.

“No, it isn’t! You’re a zombie and a warthog. I’m a man, a human being,” Absalom shouted back, inching his weight sideways to where his bazooka rested on one of the pews. “How many times do I have to tell you this. We are completely incompatible.”

While Marguerite looked at Absalom and deadpanned, “Human? Could have fooled me,” Lola whirled, her bellow of “Then marry me!” drowning out the blonde woman’s voice.

“Did you hear anything I just said!” Absalom roared.

“Then kiss me!” Lola replied, charging forward, shouting out her attack as she did. “Mad Kiss Assault!” With that, her lips elongated, and she charged forward, her lips puckering as she went.

“Never!” Absalom grabbed up his bazooka and fired point-blank into Lola, sending her back into the wall.

However, she got to her feet. Quickly. “You, you will marry me, or I will kill those floozy’s of yours!” Lola announced, racing toward Marguerite now.

Absalom stumbled, almost dropping his bazooka from the recoil of the shot, before slapping another round into his bazooka and firing just as Lola was about to reach sword range of Marguerite. The impact hurled the zombie sideways, sending her tumbling through several of the pews, and Absalom dropped the bazooka, his arm falling to his side, twitching from hand to shoulder as he swayed.

To his horror, Lola pushed to her feet again, the zombie's endurance added further by her desire for him. "Absalom, marry, you will ma..."

Suddenly, her eyes went wide, as Lola's shadow burst out of her mouth, the shadow disappearing through the hole in the wall that Lola had made upon entering. The warthog zombie fell forward, dead for all intents and purposes.

Seeing this, Absalom breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for that..."

His voice trailed off as he noticed that four of the other twenty zombies gathered as witnesses had lost their shadows. One of them who had lost his, was the zombie that had been holding up Nami, and Absalom hastily pointed to another zombie to grab her. He turned, then breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that the priest zombie was still in place. "We're running out of time! Speed read through the rest."

At his gesture, the zombie still holding Marguerite captive came forward, joining the one holding Nami in front of the priest, with Absalom moving between them. This did not stop Marguerite from demanding her release or for someone to at least tell her what a wedding was.

"Right, I think we can assume that the whole forever hold your peace bit has been accomplished." The priest muttered, still annoyed at the interruption before time. "Absalom, do you take these women to be your lawfully wedded wives?"

Nami began to groan, but Absalom ignored it for now as well as Marguerite's continued shouts, throwing his shoulders back and nodding firmly. "I do!"

"Nami of the Straw Hat crew, do you take Absalom as your husband?" the priest asked.

The zombie behind Nami forced her head up and down. "Yes. Absalom-sama is the love of my life, and I will cheerfully stay with him forever!"

Absalom gave the zombie a thumbs up for that one and then leaned down, puckering his lips as he slowly removed the veil.

This was the image Nami woke up to, wincing in pain from her dozens of wounds, her head throbbing from a concussion. "Ow, god, I am so..." Nami's voice trailed off as he saw the incoming pair of very hairy, almost lion-like lips, and she shrieked, "Oh hell no!" She dodged rapidly, thrusting backward with her feet, causing the zombie to stumble backward as well.

Marguerite's eyes widened. "Wait, does he want to do that to me? What is it, anyway?"

"Gah, stop moving, woman! You're ruining our wedding!" Absalom growled between attempts to kiss the Straw Hat girl.

“Wh, wedding?” Nami grunted. All the movement of Nami’s head had her feeling even worse, but facing a fate worse than death, she kept the going, even as she tried to break out of the zombie’s grip, only to find it like steel around her arms and waist.

She then kicked out, catching Absalom in the stomach but doing no harm.

“Darn it, just let me kiss you!” Absalom bellowed, stepping backward and glaring at the defiant orange-haired woman.

But Absalom had run out of time.

Chopper charged through the opening that Lola had made, racing forward and barreling over the rubble. Transforming from his reindeer form into his Heavy Point as he closed, Chopper punched out hard, catching the zombie holding Nami from behind, as his other hand grabbed her arm, wrenching her out of the zombie’s grip, putting her behind him.

“Oh, you have to be kidding me!” Absalom shouted, almost tempted to stomp his foot like a little boy, furious at once more being interrupted. “Who the hell are you! Wait, that hat... You’re a Straw Hat!”

“That’s right,” Chopper said, clenching his fists. “And I won’t let you harm our navigator anymore!”

“Harm wasn’t in the cards, not for her anyway. For you, that is a different story! You lot, get him!” The watching soldier zombies charged forward, but Chopper whirled, smashing the first to reach him flat. Reaching down, Chopper grabbed their mouths, stuffing them with salt. He had taken all of the salt that Lola and the other survivors gathered along with all that he had grabbed from the kitchens, which wasn’t all that much but it would help.

With the first two dealt with, Chopper grabbed them up, taking a lesson from the Franky School as he used them as makeshift flails against the others. “RAAAH!! I am Tony Tony Chopper, and I am a Straw Hat Monster, RAAA!!!”

Meanwhile, Nami had pushed yourself to her feet, staring hard at Marguerite and Absalom, before he disappeared. Her eyes widened at that, and she shouted, “Chopper! Look out, that bastard went invisible again.”

Chopper nodded, then ducked an unseen fist, returning a blow which hammered into Absalom’s unseen chest, as he shouted out, “I’m a reindeer, you don’t think I can smell you, lion-man!?”

Staggering, Absalom kept his invisibility power going but still backed away, letting the zombies take over. Thanks to his distracting Chopper, they had closed now, and several of them

were trying to grab Chopper's arms while the others attacked, biting or punching or kicking as they could.

Behind him, Nami took stock for a moment, looking down at her dress for the first time and her eyes widened. "Wow, how pretty, no, later for that, wait... darn it, they took my gauntlets." Looking around, she grabbed up a bit of the pew, using that as a makeshift club, smashing a zombie over the head but doing nothing. "DAMN!"

Meanwhile, Marguerite flailed, her head going back, crashing into the nose of the zombie holding her, but doing nothing since all zombies didn't really feel pain. But it blinded the creature for a moment, and she hurled them both sideways, trying to smash him into the pulpit. "Straw Hats, get me free, and I'll fight with you!"

Glaring at the other woman, Nami **really** didn't want to do that. It had been Marguerite who had taken her out of the fight on their ship and possibly given her the concussion she was fighting now. But looking back at the fight, she knew that they would need the help. On his own, Chopper was slowly losing headway against the numbers of the zombies as more clung to him.

And my weapon isn't doing anything! I'm going to need more muscle training after this Looking around, she spotted an open doorway nearby. Within, there was a gleam of silver. Hope dawning, Nami raced in that direction, kicking the door open and finding her gauntlet there on a pile of her other clothing. She pulled it on and raced back into the fight, finding that Chopper had been forced to his knees by a blow to his back, although he now had the invisible man in his grip and wasn't letting go. He was punching the invisible man with his free fist, while the invisible man was returning jabs and punches against Chopper's chest.

"Eat flame, assholes!" Nami snarled, activating her gauntlet's power. Like her staff, Laki had enhanced this gauntlet under Nami's directions and through trial and error.

The flame that came out of her gauntlet's palm wasn't just a flame-like Franky's Fresh Fire. Instead, it was the same kind of plasma-like jet of superheated air that Laki had created for Kamakiri. It didn't just light the zombies on fire. Those the jet struck directly were practically incinerated. Those around the edge were badly burned, their bodies catching on fire just from the wake of the attack.

"Gah, that Bitch!"

"Who uses fire, honestly!"

"Lord Absalom's orders be damned, take her down!"

Chopper twisted around as the zombies instantly went for Nami, tossing the sorely wounded Absalom to crash into the pew to one side. He rolled, still invisible but now barely able to lift himself off his feet, let alone anything else.

But Chopper, thanks partially to still being somewhat fresh, or at least far fresher than any of the rest of the living combatants on *Thriller Bark*, fought them off, letting Nami fall back and use her gauntlet again. “We’re the Straw Hats, and we’re not going to get beaten by simple zombies!”

Seeing this, the zombie holding Marguerite tossed her aside, charging forward to join the fight. This proved to be a mistake. While Marguerite had been hurt in the fighting on the *Everlasting Resolve*, she actually hadn’t been as hurt as Nami had thanks to Marguerite. Indeed, Nami could barely see, and indeed had missed entirely with her last flame-dial attack,

Marguerite was also an Amazon. She grabbed a piece of a shattered pew, charging forward, stabbing it into a zombie, and then barreling forward, carrying her victim into two others, taking them all down. She then rolled away before they could grab at her, moving to take a position next to Chopper, both hands up in front of her in a boxing stance. “If you have any salt packets, give me some!”

Chopper nodded, tossing her a few of the prepared ones that Frankie had given him, keeping a handful for himself, as he used his other hand to batter away the zombies coming towards them. Thanks to the need to protect Nami, he couldn’t really use his other forms, as he had in the previous fight.

But he and Nami remained the zombie’s primary targets, for reasons that were proven accurate a second later as even on the ground, Nami fired off her gauntlet once more, turning another zombie into ash, while a second fell to the ground rolling desperately to put out the fire.

Marguerite took advantage of this, leaping from one zombie to another, grabbing their mouths and shoving a small packet of salt into each. When the last of the zombies fell, Marguerite slumped into a nearby pew, sitting down on it, ignoring the fact that it creaked alarmingly under her weight thanks to a crack made by one of the zombies hitting it.

She looked up at Chopper admiringly, shaking her head. “I know you’re only here to save your crewmate, but thank you for saving me as well.”

“Not a problem Miss Marguerite. Heck, you helped me as well in this fight, so I’d say we’re even,” Chopper said, shifting to his short form as he scurried over to Nami, already pulling out some medicine from his backpack, putting a half against her forehead, then forcing several pills down her throat.

The sight of this change caused Marguerite's eyes to widen in shock, but Nami sent a scowl her way, before looking blearily at Chopper. "Don't make nice with her! She's the one that nearly broke my skull. I'm seeing five of you right now and I know that's wrong!"

"Don't worry. These pills will help with your nausea and your other symptoms. Although, when we get back to the ship, I'm going to order you to rest, eat, and not move for a while." He waited until Nami answered in the affirmative before looking over at Miss Marguerite. "As for Miss Marguerite, I can afford to be nice to her, because the rest of her crew were also captured so that their shadows could be taken by Gecko Moria. We freed them and were sort of in an alliance right now."

He waited until Nami took the pills, giving her a drink from a flask he kept in his bag along with many of his tools. He waited for her to look back at him, her eyes noticeably tracking better now. "Now that you're safe, I need to go and find their leader, the pirate Empress and Luffy, and tell them what's been going on. From what we learned, the two of them have been fighting. Along with two other warlords. Can you believe that!?"

"My leader Hebihime-sama, Boa Hancock, and the one called Tyrant. He's a massive man dressed in black and white and always carries a book," Marguerite interjected. "And if the Hebihime-sama learns that Moria sold us out, she will pull out of the fight."

Nami slowly looks to the side where Chopper had appeared, staring out into the distance beyond. "It might be too late. I can feel the amount of lightning Luffy's throwing around from here. Eesh, that will mess up the local weather... bah. What am I saying? This is the Grand Line. The weather's already fucked up."

"I know, we saw that earlier," Chopper revealed. "Still, if there's any way we can bring this fighting to an end faster..."

With Marguerite looking on, Nami again answered in the affirmative and slowly stood up. "In that case, Chopper, you're going to have to carry me. No way am I just going to stay here and wait for you to return." She gestured around. "Not with the Invisible Pervert around here."

Twitching, Chopper realized that Absalom wasn't where Chopper had hurled him. There wasn't even the indent of a body amid the rubble of the pews. "Darn it!"

"We can't stay and search for him, though," the blonde Kuja mused. "That would take too long, and we would miss our chance to try and stop the conflict between our crews."

Nodding, Chopper turned away, transforming into his reindeer form.

Once more, Marguerite stared, clapping her hands together in delight as a wide grin appeared on her face. "That's amazing, you. You're like a magic reindeer!"

“I’m not a... Wait, you call me a reindeer! Yes! Someone finally recognizes my species!” Chopper said, smiling happily at Marguerite. “Thank you so much. You’re the first one to get it right!”

At a jerk of Chopper’s head, Marguerite got on behind Nami, who grumbled a bit, not exactly thrilled to be this close to the woman who had knocked her unconscious in so brutal a manner. But she didn’t have time to complain as the moment they were both on his back, Chopper began to race away. “Now hang on, both of you!”

Behind him, Absalom stared from the corner he had crawled into, letting his invisibility finally fade. His body, a mass of bruises and pain before, was now almost entirely unresponsive thanks to the beating Chopper had given him. “D, damn them... the freaking Straw Hats... they beat me so bad I can barely feel anything. SO much for the skin of an elephant and the sinews of a lion... And... lightning? Lightning against...” Absalom’s eyes widened as he put two and two together, shivering. “I, I need to get out of here...”

But with his body barely able to crawl, let alone walk – one of Chopper’s punches had broken his hip bone – Absalom lay there, trying to gather what strength he could. “Still, those two ladies... angels, angels come down to heave, the pair of them.

“Damn it!” a voice shouted from the doorway to the church. “Too late. My Mellorine Meter tells me Nami-chwan is gone again, heading off to the Aho-swordsman and the Lightning Sadist. Drat, maybe I...ohohohoho... what do we have here?”

Absalom slowly looked in that direction and saw another one of the Straw Hats. To his horror, Absalom recognized him as the bastard who had done the majority of the damage to him, when he tried to sneak aboard their ship. The kickboxer looked much the worse for wear, his leg in some kind of spider-silk cast, his shirt gone, body covered in welts, sores, and burns. But he was still moving and now was looking at Absalom, his face lighting up in an almost devilish manner.

“Well, hello, dream wrecker. How nice to see you...” Sanji smirked, limping forward as Absalom’s eyes widened in horror. “Now, why don’t you just tell me what you were doing here with Nami-chwan, and I might make your end swift and painless.”

Alas, he didn’t.

OOOOOO

As events on Thriller Bark continued to shift and turn, high in the fog-covered air over the Florian Triangle, Luffy was panicking. His race after Kuma had done the one thing that he had been worried about most of all: it had brought him too far away from Thriller Bark to allow

him to sense even Eve's personality via Kenbunshoku. At first, when he had rushed after Kuma, he had been able to sense her, the closest of his crew, like a beacon he could return to. However, the battle had taken him further away, and now, in the fog of the triangle, he couldn't see or sense a damn thing.

"Dammit!" Luffy muttered as he continually reached out with his Kenbunshoku, pushing it harder and further than he had before, most of his concentration on that even as he began to use his lightning powers and Geppo to make a circuit around the thick fog of the Florian Triangle, slowly circling inwards.

As he did, Luffy sensed several things. He sensed the various fish and monsters living in the water of the Grand Line, including one mind that belonged to something truly huge, which seemed to be roving around the fog. It was **old** that mind, ancient even, but slow. Indeed, it almost seemed to be in some kind of torpor, or at least was feeling very lazy, so Luffy ignored it.

That was all he could sense for about thirty minutes, but then, finally, to his right Luffy found Zoro's mind in the distance. *Well shit, I must have been moving sideways or something at some point.* But a moment later, Luffy's relief faded as he felt Boa and Gecko's minds in the same area as Zoro, fighting him. *Damn it!*

Down below, Zoro twisted around, dodging between two beams sent his way from Hancock, then pushed himself into a Soru, zooming away across the ground even as his legs burned from the effort, which was actually more work than Geppo. The ground where he had been standing was sliced clean down to the bedrock of the small island that had been incorporated into Thriller Bark, by a strike from Ozoro, and then, the shadow blades came up and towards Zoro again, as Moria cackled. "Yes, yes! With this, even a logia user is going to fall against me!"

"Really? Are you ready to put that to the test?" Luffy snarled, suddenly appearing in front of Ozoro's face with a flash of lightning. He nodded towards Zoro, gesturing with one hand to put some more distance between himself and the giant. "Tag in Zoro. This is my fight now."

Retargeting quickly, Boa was the first to respond to Luffy's sudden return. "Slave Arrow Bombardment!" she shouted, twirling in place, creating a series of hearts the same size as her torso. Dozens, then hundreds of slave arrows rocketed from these hearts toward both Straw Hats.

Zoro grimaced, blocking several of them, but a few got through, hammering into him like cannonballs, sending him tumbling away. Luckily, slave arrows didn't freeze their opponents into stone, or else he'd be all out of the fight already. But they hurt like blazes, even as he replied with his own long-range attacks, using Shusui to lash out with Thirty-Six Pound Cannon shots back at Hancock.

Meanwhile, Luffy just dodged through the arrows aimed his way, lashing out with several lightning bolts towards Hancock, then a larger attack towards the zombie. "Hino!"

The bird of prey-shaped lightning attack crashed into Ozoro, causing him to stagger, even as he shouted, "It doesn't hurt! I'm a zombie. The elements can't hurt me!"

Hancock dodged around the attacks aimed her way and now watched as the shadow swords swung up towards Luffy only to be exploded out of existence by Luffy shouting out a new attack. "Sango." A second later, Luffy darted forward, lashing out with another attack towards where Moria was acting like he was sitting in a control room in the center of the Giants. "Just because I really think that's kind of awesome doesn't means I'm going to not attack you there, Moria."

"Kishishishishi! That is if you can hit me at all," the shadow master intoned, as Ozoro shifted instantly, taking the hit on his side rather than allowing it to smash into his stomach. He replied by lashing out with another shadow sword, only this time, the shadow dissipated before Luffy had a chance to do it, and Ozoro's other hand came up, punching out hard.

Hard or not, though, Moria had no knowledge of Busoshoku, and even if he had, he wouldn't have been able to imbue the zombie with it. So Luffy simply let the strike hit, dissipating through it, allowing the lightning of his body to do further damage.

Still, the zombie really isn't feeling it, and not all of that can be attributed to him being undead. That giant body of his will take a lot of punishment before... Before he could complete that thought, Luffy dodged through a series of energy attacks from Boa, who was keeping Zoro on the back foot and still launching attacks up at him.

Luffy turned his attention towards Boa for a second, launching out a series of wolf-shaped lightning attacks that stalked down towards her as if they were living creatures for a moment from every direction.

"Bah! You should have learned by now that these kinds of attacks do little to me!" Boa sneered, putting her fingers into the pistol position as she twirled in place, annihilating them with Pistol Kisses.

Zoro took advantage of this, launching an attack towards her. "Black Clad Seventy-Six Pound Cannon!"

Turning in his direction, Boa quickly covered her body with Busoshoku as she lashed out with a kick into the attack. Despite being far more powerful than previously thanks to Shusui, the attack did no damage, shattering on her defense, and she launched herself through it at the surprised swordsman.

He tried to defend himself again, bringing up his blades to match her strike but was flung backward, rolling with a kick. Thankfully that kick was just a Busoshoku strike rather than a Mero Mero-based assault.

Luffy tried to move to his aid, but Ozoro smacked two hands together, creating a sonic boom that crashed into Luffy, hurting him in the only way that Moria perhaps could: through his senses. Lightning or not, Luffy still had to hear.

He tumbled through the air for a moment, both hands clamped around his ears, before striking the ground and dissipating into another lightning bolt, reappearing above the giant once more in a flash of lightning. Another massive attack from Enel's repertoire, El Thor crashed down into the back of the giant, lighting the entire giant and Moria in its stomach up, causing Moria to shriek in anger and pain, while Luffy launched a railgun round with his other hand, having picked up a shard of metal from the ground a second ago. *I wanted to snipe at Moria with it but needs must.*

Instead of pressing her attack on the swordsman, this attack forced Hancock to twirl. Still clad head to toe in Busoshoku, but now feeling the impact of the dozens of lightning strikes she'd been forced to tank, Boa lashed out at the incoming bit of steel, smashing it aside. But thanks to being off balance the strike hurled her sideways to crash into the ground with enough force to dent the ground underneath her.

Then she had to roll forward, dodging under an attack from Zoro's blades, which were similarly enhanced. Kicking up off of the ground Boa lunged into a shoulder check. This move took Zoro by surprise, not having anticipated that kind of attack from Hancock.

Even as her shoulder struck him, Boa had created another technique around her other arm. "Perfume Ulna!" Like Perfume Femur, this strike covered everything it hit and everything around it with stone, although she hadn't taken much time to charge it up. And although he got his elbow between the strike and his chest, Zoro was no exception. Within a second, his whole arm was stone, the process stopping halfway over his pectoral.

The next instant as he tried to disengage and bring Shusui around, Boa proved something that Zoro really, really could have done without learning. His quick step back meant that Boa's follow-on blow only struck his now frozen arm a glancing blow. But even that strike caused Zoro to bellow in pain, collapsing to his knees. "GAAAAhhhh!!!"

"What?" Boa murmured, surprised, then seeing Zoro trying once more to recover, she brought her hands together once more. Seeing no need to use any of her advanced attacks, she simply shot a Mero Mero Beam directly into Zoro's chest.

The swordsman gasped as the air left his lungs from the strike, and then his eyes widened as he felt the stone effect spreading through his body. "Dammit, you..." He snarled,

but by the time Boa had taken a single step away from Zoro, his entire body had been turned to stone, his face set in a grimace.

Staring up at where Luffy was fighting, Hancock prepared another Slave Arrow Bombardment, launching it, then looking around. She smiled thinly. "You're not the only one who can fling things about," Boa murmured, moving over to where shards of Ozoro's 'swords' lay, shattered by Zoro. She picked up several of them, concentrated, coating them with Busoshoku, much like her people could do to their arrows, and then reached out with her Kenbunshoku, trying to discern a pattern in Luffy's movements. There wasn't one, and Boa grimaced before deciding to at least try anyway.

Luffy had just launched another attack at Ozoro, which caused the zombie to stumble back, protecting his eye from the attack. It wouldn't have saved the zombie from Luffy's follow-up, but then something struck Luffy's back and side, causing him to grunt in agony as he was nearly smashed out of the sky. He recovered using Geppo but was far closer to the ground than he had been a moment ago and then looked up as another piece of metal coated with the black of Busoshoku came towards them.

"Damn it!" Unable to cover his own fist with the power fast enough, Luffy still smashed it aside, grimacing at the impact broke several of his fingers, although they healed almost immediately. *Let's hear it for ki, bastards!*

Then he dissipated himself as Ozoro's foot came through where his body a second ago, reappearing on Ozoro's knee, his hands clenching the giant's red skin as he shouted out, "Vari!"

With the power of two hundred thousand volts coursing through him, Ozoro fell, crashing into the ground as he spasmed, unable to keep his balance on 1 foot. Moria also howled in pain, but even through his agony, he summoned up further shadows. *I've used more than 1000 of them so far! But I can feel it, Hancock and me, we're wearing him down.*

As he thought that, Luffy disappeared from where he had been, reappearing beside Boa, throwing a punch that nearly broke her jaw, sending her tumbling before she could use her Busoshoku. The next assault she met, and the two of them went at it hammer and tongs for a moment with just fists and feet. Luffy took to the air, bouncing and using lightning travel and occasionally attacking, interspersing the assaults with Busoshoku clad fists and normal-style attacks.

Moria interrupted this contest a second later as another shadow blade launched towards where Luffy was standing. He didn't have the time to switch from Busoshoku to his lightning body, and so the impact hit him, hurling Luffy sideways, although the Busoshoku deadened the cutting force of the shadow. Luffy grimaced as he stood up, glaring at both Shichibukai. Thanks to his continued use of Busoshoku, his ki reserves were kind of low, but that just meant Luffy would have to rely more on lightning. And Luffy, like Enel before him and any other logia user, could use his element for days on end without feeling it.

Luffy launched himself up and into the air again, hurling out another bird-of-prey-shaped lightning blast towards Moria, causing the giant to twist around, but it was noticeably moving slower now. His body had been ravaged by fire and electricity, and bits of its flesh was scorched where the lightning struck, particularly around the knee Luffy had been holding onto.

Seeing that, Luffy summoned up a storm again, dozens of lightning strikes crashing into the giant and Boa. The Pirate Empress desperately protected herself with her own powers, but once more, Moria had to call upon still more shadows, imbuing them into Ozoro to give him more physical endurance.

It worked, but Moria estimated he just lost another four hundred or so shadows. Grimly, he kept on calling more of the shadows to him, imbuing both his body and that of Ozoro with them, and finally, he got to the point where Luffy's meal of lightning bolts weren't harming Moria himself. They still cost several shadows with every three or four strikes on Ozoro, but that was all right.

Hancock too weathered the storm as well as she could, although she was really beginning to feel it now, and her thoughts were nowhere near as optimistic as Moria's of a moment before as the accumulated electrical damage was causing her body to twitch, and she could feel her Haki reserves dropping like mad now. *I can't keep my Busoshoku up for much longer! Luffy is just going to outlast me... er, us, I suppose. Curse it, it really looks like the rumors on the Goro Goro No Mi do have some substance to them.*

It was during this attack that something new was added to the battlefield. Not a combatant, but a trio bearing news. "Hebihime-sama!/Luffy!"

Hearing his name over the sound of lightning, Luffy instantly stopped his attack, staring over to where Chopper, an unknown blonde woman of similar build to Nami, and Nami herself were. "Nami! What the hell are you doing here? Get awa..." his voice trailed off, and he gaped. "And what the hell is with the weddings dresses?"

At the same time, Hancock recognized the blonde as coming from her crew. "Marguerite! What are you doing? Get away from here at once, you foolish girl!"

Whatever reply Nami would have given was interrupted as Moria ordered, "Ozoro, grab them! We can use them as hostages!" Before, he had been too concerned about ensuring his own safety to bother with a long-term plan, but now that this had been presented to him, he wasn't going to turn away.

"Right!" Ozoro shouted back, flinging himself forward's, reaching for the trio of newcomers who all screamed even as Hancock darted forward, furious at this attack on one of her people.

"Moria, I will roast you over a slow fire if you attack my people!" Boa roared.

However, Luffy was there an instant before the massive giant's hand could clinch around them. Once more, using the technique he had used to finish off Kuma, he appeared on Ozoro's outstretched hand, and with a shout of, "Raiuzu (Lightning Vortex)!" cutting straight through the hand.

The hand kept going while Ozoro stumbled into the ground, staring at where his hand had been a moment ago. It didn't hurt but losing a hand was still a shock to the zombie.

As Chopper used his heavy point to smash the hand aside, Moria directed his shadows to move, reaching out to grab them from the stump of the wrist. But a second later, Moria fell back in his command center as another blast of lightning flashed into Ozoro's stomach before he could defend his master.

"GAAAAAhhhh you bastarrrrrrrrr!!!!" Moria shrieked in agony, losing several dozen more shadows, even as more flocked to him, recalled from all over the island. But as he fell back, something far more dangerous to Moria than a single lightning attack was about to occur.

Meanwhile, Boa's charge slid to a halt, and she scowled, staring at the two Straw Hats. She did not attack though, having seen the trio arrive with the two women riding the back of the Zoan user. "What is going on here!?"

Nami stared at Boa muttering under her breath about how the hell she could still look good smudged, bloody and blistered, while Marguerite just stared at her Empress, never having seen her like this before, roughed up, wearing some odd shirt over her dress, bruised and battered, and glaring angrily, rather than haughtily.

That shock didn't stop her from replying, though. "Hebihime-sama, we have been betrayed! Moria sent his zombies and Absalom after us when we were already unconscious and beaten by the Straw Hats. He intended to take our shadows."

Hancock blinked, scowling angrily towards the blonde. "What! We lost against the other Straw Hats? And then Moria sprang his betrayal on us?" Like her officers, Boa was not surprised that Moria had turned on them. The effectiveness of that attempt, however, **was** astonishing. As was the fact that her crew had lost to the Straw Hats, who, judging by their bounties, had been without their three strongest fighters.

"Yes, my lady, it was close, but they overwhelmed us. I, I was among the last to fall, by which point Sandersonia-sama was also beaten. And then, well, we don't know how, but both Nami and I woke up as prisoners to Absalom. He wanted to marry us, whatever that is."

"The rest of your crew were also taken captive. The two Devil Fruit users are somewhere on the island dumped in the water. We didn't have time to search for them before rushing to find you," Chopper added. "I helped your crew along with my friends, but all of them were too battered to come with me to search for miss Marguerite and Nami," Chopper added.

Boa stared at the trio of newcomers, then over to where Luffy had listened to all this, his arms crossed. He glanced over to Moria, then back to Hancock, one eyebrow rising in question. "So, are you going to keep riding this dead horse into the ground?" he asked, one eyebrow rising in question. "'Cause, the horse is about ta be turned into glue. With you on it, if need be."

Scowling at him, Boa's answer was tart, although it lacked any real heat, only pride. "I will not surrender! But I am willing to parlay for a ceasefire between our crews."

Luffy rolled his eyes but shrugged, watching as still more shadows rose through the air, racing towards Moria. He must have also heard because he looked to be going for broke. The number of shadows he had stuffed into Ozoro had an obvious effect. The giant's body had grown even larger, while the hand Luffy had sliced off was put back on somehow, and shadow swords began to appear all around him, their edges gleaming dully in the fog. "Potato Pohtato, I guess. But what do you have to offer?"

"Information. A lot of information, as well as a promise to not share the secret about your lightning powers. And to transform your two crewmates back," Boa responded instantly. "I will tell you this now as a hint: the WeeGee did not just want you destroyed before you could gather more power. They weren't just trying to kill an up-and-coming rookie. They have other wheels moving that you might want to know about."

Luffy zoomed towards her, stopping a barefoot away from Hancock, reforming into his full body. Boa didn't flinch. She didn't even call on her Busoshoku, simply staring back, her arms crossed. Luffy searched her face for a moment, then slowly nodded, wondering what information she had. He held out his hand and said simply, "I accept this trade and declare peace between our crews. We'll discuss more details after I deal with Moria."

"Deal with me! Deal with me?!" Moria bellowed. "Black Box!"

Shadows rose around Hancock and Luffy, but Luffy simply flared his lightning again, shattering the box easily, as he turned away from Hancock, who retreated to stand beside the other three.

The number of shadows both Moria and Ozoro had taken had transformed both fleshy robot and driver. Moria had grown to the point he barely fit in his control area, and his hands gleamed with shadows as they clutched either side of the control room, infusing his shadow within Ozoro in turn. Ozoro had grown at least half again as large as he had previously been. His skin had become even redder, and shadowy swords had formed all around him.

Luffy figured the sword thing was Zoro's influence again, and he shook his head, wishing that Zoro had been the one to fight Ozoro. That would've been somehow better. On the other hand, from what Luffy had seen, it looked as if Zoro had beaten his shadow already, even if he hadn't forced it out of Ozoro's body.

And the number of shadows had seemingly unhinged Moria's mind. "You, you think that you can beat me! Even with your logia powers and your strength, you are but a rookie. I am a warlord! I am the master of shadows, I am the master of Thriller Bark! I will never be defeated by a rookie! Shadow Monarch, Four-thousand Shadows Giant Assault!" he shrieked.

"Yeaah!! That's right!" Ozoro shouted in turn, his voice deeper and less maddened than Moria. "With my Master's power backing me, I will become the greatest swordsman that has ever been.

The shadow swords flashed forward towards Luffy, who began to glow, dodging through them, sending out pulses of lightning all around himself so much it almost looked like he was a traveling lightbulb, destroying every single shadow sword that came within range as he closed. Then he was bouncing up and off of another blow from Ozoro until he was up in the air in front of them. "This is reality calling Moria. It's had its fill of you. Time to disappear."

With that, Luffy stayed still, letting several other shadows come close, cutting through his form and doing nothing. Luffy just let Moria rage at him, concentrating as he held his hands above his head in either direction.

Watching from nearby, Nami and Chopper both shivered as they stared at the most powerful attack that Enel had used during his and Luffy's fight. Although then, it hadn't been intended for Luffy, too slow to form, too slow to move to keep up with Luffy's speed. He'd still been hit several times by it thanks to being, in Nami's opinion, too damn noble for his own good, only surviving because he was too stubborn to die.

But Ozoro and Moria? Neither of them even noticed their doom approaching, in a form of a huge quantity of black thunderclouds. They attempted again and again to attack Luffy, with Moria howling out about how he would not be defeated, but with Luffy in lightning form, he just couldn't be touched at all.

"Raigo," Luffy said softly. At a gesture, the massive ball of ever moving lightning and storm crashed down onto Ozoro and Moria both. Moria screamed as it struck and kept on screaming as the ball enveloped his position.

The amount of lightning cascading through the ball of black cloud and lightning was enough to sizzle flesh, to melt bone, to slay anyone who wasn't covered in Busoshoku, or, Luffy reflected, rubber. Despite the durability Moria and Ozoro had been given by eating Moria's captured shadows, they could not survive this.

Within minutes of the attack striking, Ozoro's body stopped responding to Moria's directions, burning away in places to smoke and ash. Moria lasted a little longer, shielded by Ozoro's body, but soon, he too died, his entire form eaten away by the lightning of the Raigo. When the attack ended, nothing was left of either of them, and a large crater had been gouged out of the ground of the ship-island. A warlord had been literally erased from existence.

Hancock stared. Marguerite stared. Chopper simply shook his head, while Nami shivered, looking over at Boa and Marguerite, somehow feeling jealous at the other woman's looks for a moment before the seriousness of what had just occurred forced it from her mind. "Pray that you never see Luffy serious again, Pirate Empress. Pray, that you keep on seeing his smile, because when that disappears, it isn't pretty."

Boa could only nod as Luffy slowly descended out of the sky, shaking his head wearily. Even with using his logia power, this had been one hell of a fight. *Mainly*, he admitted to himself, *because of the woman who's standing beside two of my crewmates now.*

He moved in their direction, smiling wryly as he pulled his Straw Hat out of his ki space and set it on his head, winking at Nami before looking over at Chopper. "All right Chopper, lead us to the others, and Boa, free Zoro. We'll gather our two crews together before finalizing this whole peace treaty between us. Whatever you have to tell me as your forfeit, I doubt you want to have to do it twice."

Boa nodded, and Luffy finally lost his serious look, smirking at her. "So, think you should have taken me up on my offer to give up the fight earlier?"

Reminded of that moment, Boa rolled her eyes but smiled back at him, even as she replied negatively, moving over to free Zoro. A second later however, there was a deep, rumbling sound from beneath them, and then a crack like the world ending. Segments of the island-ship around them shattered, falling into the large crater, out of which water spurted. In the distance more cracks, this time both of wood and stone fracturing could be heard.

"My word, that cannot be good," Boa murmured, turning away from the now freed Zoro, who stumbled to his knees, staring at her and then around at the wrecked forest. As he watched, the canyons and craters from the fight began to emit noises and water gushed as the whole island started to sink.

"Run," Luffy suggested, racing over to Nami and picking her up over one shoulder with Chopper over the other.

"But what about the treasure!?" Nami wailed, causing Luffy to laugh even as he raced along, taking to the air as he did.

"Priorities, Nami. Let's get to the ship. Worry about life and limb first," Luffy suggested, as Zoro, who was looking at Boa Hancock very questioningly, but making no move to attack, charged after his captain.

"Agreed! I just hope the rest of both of our crews are sensible enough to flee as well" Even as she spoke Boa raced towards Marguerite, who had slid off Chopper's back earlier. Now Boa swept into a princess carry ignoring her startled cry of surprise as she ran on, as she raced along. The Pirate Empress and the Two Straw Hats continued to race towards where

Luffy could sense the *Everlasting Resolve* and the rest of their crews as all around them, *Thriller Bark*, the largest ship in the world, started to sink into the waters of the Florian Triangle.

End Chapter

Hooo... wee... So yeah, that's a thing. I had a few thoughts about Kuma, but frankly, why the hell Rayleigh trusted Kuma in canon was weird to me, and here, well, Luffy's in a position of power, Kuma can't convince him, and... yeah. As for the ending, this *Thriller Bark* has taken a SHIT ton of damage – two masts gone, lots of damage, cuts, canyons, whole sides of the original castle area just gone. So it makes sense to me the ship might start sinking like this.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this, and as always, leave a review.