

I am not Japanese. Covers both bases, really.

Whereas ATP at long last won the large story poll, Stallion once more won the small story poll. I will keep it in the small story poll until this arc is finished.

This has been mildly edited by Tomon, fully by me with Grammarly, and fully by Hiryo.

Chapter 25: Gathering Storm

Having left the room where they had been talking with Iceburg to answer the call from the ship, Makino clicked off the communications device, humming thoughtfully to herself as she stared at the wall of the hallway. Well, that was interesting. Makino wasn't entirely certain if she agreed with Luffy on his priorities, wanting to find the man who, at one point in the past, was known to craft the kind of weapons he wanted for the ship, rather than someone who had a proven record of crafting capable ships. But he was the captain, and that was that.

And honestly, Resolve is important enough that if we can get the best by waiting a bit, I'm more than willing to try, she thought. Entering the room, Makino smiled as she sat next to Nami, leaning into the younger woman to whisper in her ear. "Luffy thinks we might have a second option. Let's wrap this up and head back to the ship. I'll tell you more on the way."

Nami blinked at that, then shrugged as she agreed, but then it was her turn to lean in, as she teasingly whispered, "Are you sure we should? I mean, we've only been away for a few hours and given what you said about how thirsty Robin was acting..."

"Thank you for putting that image into my mind," Makino grumbled, pushing her away with a hand to her face, causing Nami to giggle. Yet it seemed slightly forced to Makino, who suddenly wondered if Nami was still pining after Luffy despite her efforts to distance herself. *Regardless, Luffy's right. If Nami doesn't feel any attraction to his female side, they couldn't work out in the long run. And I still don't think that Nami is a very sharing sort of girl. Still, maybe the humor is a good sign...*

Shaking her head of such thoughts, Makino turned to look over the coffee table to where Iceburg was sitting. "As you no doubt discerned, that was our captain. He has told us to off on signing any formal contract and requested that we return to the ship."

Iceburg blinked but nodded. Part of him didn't like letting all that glorious money, money he could put toward his secret project, wall out the door. That money would go a long way to solving quite a few of his problems, or rather Water 7's problems. Nevertheless, he wasn't going to push, especially considering this pirate crew included the Devil Child, Nico

Robin. *That is still disturbing, frankly.* The Demon Child and her ability to find the ancient weapons had been a particular bogeyman to Iceburg for a long time.

“That is fine. However, I would prefer that you to wait for Kaku to come back. That way, we’ll know more about what we have to do.”

“And how long will that take?” Nami inquired.

Paulie spoke up now, shrugging his shoulders, staring up at the ceiling. Although he often didn’t act like it, Paulie was Iceburg’s senior apprentice and Iceburg trusted his skills. Although not his ability to manage his own money...

“No more than forty minutes or so, Kaku isn’t as fast coming as he is going.” For some reason, Paulie didn’t understand, that caused Tilestone to snort under their breath, covering it with a cough.

But Makino saw the joke and rolled her eyes, muttering to her breath about “Male humor being the same everywhere.”

Meanwhile, Nami nodded. “However, remember that since he’s already seen what our ship is carrying, Kaku will have to sign a formal nondisclosure agreement. Even if we don’t end up using your services, we still will require him to keep the secrets of our ship.”

While frowning internally once more at all that glorious money slipping through his fingers, Iceburg nodded. “Right. I’ll send for a notary. Kalifa, could you go and ask for a notary to join us here?”

Kalifa had been sitting at her own desk nearby as she wrote up the formal contract the two sides had been trying to finish for a while. “Mayor Iceburg... that is sexual harassment.”

“Ah, so harsh! Just asking you to do something is harassment!?” Iceburg gasped in shock.

Chuckling, Paulie looked down from the ceiling, his eyes glancing towards Kalifa and the two women in front of them. Whatever he was going to say was lost as his face slowly turned red, and he suddenly exclaimed, “GAH damn it, what is up with your clothing?! So indecent! Can’t you dress like a normal person!?”

“This is normal, Shy Guy,” Nami retorted, leaning back and crossing her legs deliberately. “And if you think this is bad, you should wait until you see what I wear when I’m doing physical exercises. I don’t want you keeling over thanks to blood-loss if you end up working on our ship.”

“Oooh! That’s an incentive for me to take the job if I’ve ever heard it!” Tilestone shouted in amusement.

“Gah, don’t encourage her, Tilestone,” Paulie roared, his face even redder and his teeth, to Nami’s surprise, doing the same shark impression she knew her own did occasionally.

Kalifa left then, Makino watching her with a faint frown on her face, still disapproving of the woman’s continued use of that phrase. It rang so false to her. There was also something else about Kalifa that annoyed Makino too, but she couldn’t quite put her feet on it.

Paulie’s over-the-top prudishness and Nami’s teasing of him and the other foreman, which won a blush from even Iceburg, kept them occupied, while Makino leaned back, taking a sip of her tea until Kalifa returned with the notary. Makino once more watched the woman, her hackles rising for some reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on. *Hmm, something about how Kalifa moves, maybe? I know she’s a fighter. Her kicks earlier were extremely good. But there’s something more going on here...*

Before Makino could speak up and maybe prod Kalifa a bit like she had earlier, Iceburg introduces the notary to them, the name of the man not registering as just then, the long-nosed man named Kaku came in.

To one side of the room, Zoro, who had been sleeping against the wall for a time, woke up, staring at the man. He hadn’t cared a whit about all of the back-and-forth negotiations, the talk of how much this type or that bit of work should cost, whether or not they had to pay to put up with unskilled labor etc., all passing him by. But now that the second strongest of Galley-La company’s foremen had returned, he wanted to be awake just in case.

Kaku smiled cheerily at Iceburg, saluting him as he entered. “I’m back. I did a quick survey of the ship. I wasn’t allowed access to a few of the rooms within, but I know enough for us to set a basic price.”

“All right, we have the nondisclosure agreement here, and we want you to sign it now, Kaku,” Iceburg answered, gesturing over to Kalifa’s table.

Kaku nodded agreeably, signing under his position, followed by Iceburg, and the notary, then the two pirates. After that, the notary left, smiling cheerfully at Kalifa before doing so. She narrowed her eyes, pushing up her glasses, causing the man to flinch and race away, amusing the other people in the room until she turned the same look on them.

“Ahem. Um, your report Kaku?” Iceburg coughed, quickly looking back at his most eccentric-looking foreman.

Kaku smiled, took a sip from the tea Kalifa placed in front of him, and then began. "In order of difficulty, from least to greatest. The ship has been modified heavily in recent past, with dials added to its preexisting hull."

Both Iceburg and Paulie whistled at that, looking at the pirates with renewed respect and interest, Paulie stubbing out his cigar and leaned forward with interest. "How many dials are we talking about, what kind, what are they being used for?"

"I think that the Straw Hats had quite a few more dials in storage than what they were using," Kaku said, looking over at the Pirates, who nodded in affirmation. "The ones they are currently using seem to be large breath dials. They push into the sails from behind, primitive but somewhat effective. The second type are jet dials, around two dozen, set under the water. I believe those are used for maneuvering, but not for straight-ahead speed?"

Nami nodded. "That's the way we've been using them, although we haven't used them that often. The ship was repaired, and those emplace, what two weeks ago?"

Zoro and Makino both nodded in agreement.

"So you've been to Skypiea. That's fascinating," Iceburg laughed. "And now I think that the mystery of where you all got the gold you exchanged for money is solved. But the problem with the use of dials like that on the Blue Sea is they put a tremendous amount of strain on the wood around them. They have to be properly set, and Skypiea doesn't realize that the waves and pressure of the water here is so much more than they're used to."

"Exactly," Kaku agreed. "I'll admit they're fascinating and I personally haven't worked with the dial before. But they have damaged the area of the ship that they're set into a bit. The wood there is slowly warping, and I'd say you'll start to see large-scale seepage soon. Similarly, there are some damages to portions of the gun deck which haven't been seen to properly. The masts have also all recently been replaced. The work on those was actually well done, but the wood being used is just slightly too heavy for the setting."

From there, he talked about the problems that he had pointed out to Luffy on the ship: that much of the ship had been made of wood that had not been properly cured and that the keel itself was damaged slightly. "The repairs on the keel were actually the best repairs of the lot, which proves that everyone involved knew the importance of it. But..." Kaku shrugged. "It isn't at the point where I would recommend changing ship or even telling you that I wouldn't be willing to repair a ship that would probably fail around you but it would be difficult to fix and very expensive."

Paulie scowled, picking up his cigar, taking a long drag. "Any damage to the keel is serious, no matter how well repaired. Getting that out, you might as well build a whole new ship."

“Frankly, given that, I recommend you simply buy another ship from us entirely. It would be cheaper,” Iceburg continued, slightly unwillingly, “And I think it would be the better option for you.”

“It isn’t an option at all,” Makino said firmly. “For reasons we still are not willing to disclose with you but they are real for all of that.”

All of the Galley-La people frowned at that, even Kalifa. But eventually, Iceburg just shrugged her shoulders. “If you want to leave here with the ship that is subpar in comparison to what we can provide you, but which isn’t yet an actual death trap, I’ll allow it. I’ll not be happy about it but I’ll allow the contract if you do decide to sign with us.”

“In that case, I think we’re done here. Were in no rush, Iceburg-san. We can wait.”

Iceburg nodded and stood up, bowing them out the door.

Following Makino and the Witch, Zoro paused, looking at Iceburg and the three foremen. “By the way, since we’re going to be in port for a while, I was wondering if any of your foremen were swordsmen. My captain and I believe in training and training against new people is always a good idea.”

“I’m afraid you won’t find any swordsman among us,” Kaku said, smiling politely, “but we might be in the mood for some training at some point yes. We’ll send word to your ship if any of us are free over the next few days. But remember, we are busy people.”

Snorting at that, Zoro followed the two women out the office.

“So what do you think?” Nami began, but Makino shushed her, asking the woman to wait until they were back aboard the bullhead.

There, she explained what Luffy had told, causing Nami to snort in amusement. “Wow, this Franky Family is not having a good day. Although, if they’re such morons as to keep poking the hornet’s nest, maybe they’re used to being stung?”

Makino giggled at that and pulled out the Den Den Mushi again, contacting Luffy. She told him what they had learned from Kaku and Luffy answered, “Most of that Kaku already told me, and they’re right under normal circumstances, maybe the keel being damaged like that would be an early indicator that we should jump ship. But we aren’t normal and neither are our circumstances.”

That caused Luffy’s listeners on both sides of the Den Den Mushi to smile, and then he posed a question. “Nami, what do you think of Iceburg and his foremen? Of the people there, you’re the one with the most knowledge of carpentry. And you and Makino together are really good with people.”

“I think Iceburg wants the business but doesn’t want to work on the ship himself. I’m certain that part of that is that we’re pirates and he has a lot of government contracts he cares about. But he definitely wants the business for something. There was a moment when his secretary mentioned how much money we had, when he nearly goggled,” Makino interjected.

“Still, for the amount of work we’re asking, a hundred million seems about appropriate as a starting point, although I have no idea how much of that is the price of materials,” Nami began. “I was able to follow a lot of what Kaku said, and before that, most of what Iceburg and Paulie told us about their pricing. I think they are really, really good, so I honestly think whatever you’re hoping from this Franky character, we’re still going to be using the Galley-La company.”

“We’ll see. To me, Iceburg himself not wanting to do the work is kind of annoying. Not a real deal-breaker, but... Well, whatever. Do you think you can find the Franky Family House? We didn’t wait for you.”

Makino sighed at that, shaking her head, but Nami acknowledged that she could probably find it by asking the locals for directions on areas of the island to stay away from. “We’re going to get something to eat first though, I am starving!”

Luffy laughed at that, then asked if Zoro had anything more to add.

He frowned, shrugging his shoulders. “Two of the four men are a lot stronger than the others. I could tell that they were dangerous the moment I laid eyes on them thanks to the training you’ve been putting me through. One of them is way more dangerous than the other. But I don’t think either of them is a threat to you, Luffy. Maybe together they could beat me, but I don’t think so.”

“That’s not unusual, you know,” Nami rolled her eyes. “Remember how proud these people are about the strength of their shipwrights. Is that why you asked if any of them was willing to spar?”

“Good thinking. If we’re going to be here, fighting other people would be good. We’ll talk to you when you get here,” Luffy interjected, ending the conversation.

OOOOOO

Above them, Jabra waited in the darkness of a room on the fourth story of a casino, ironically, the same casino that Paulie had broken out earlier that evening. He had left the others behind earlier that day, ordering them out into the city, to see if they could find any of the Straw Hats moving around the island. Considering what Water 7 was famous for, Jabra had elected himself to head and placed himself near the dockyard, trusting the others to keep themselves hidden.

Giving out his orders as to which area each of them should search, Jabra had sent Kumadori down to the docks set aside for pirates. "Check how many pirate crews are in port beyond the targets. We might need some cannon fodder." Fukuro he sent to look around the more destitute areas of the city, the back alleys and hidden waterways, for much the same reason.

"You won't find many gangsters or thugs here for that," Blueno warned. "The Franky Family basically recruited all of that kind of folk. And Franky's too proud to follow anyone else's orders, no matter how much money you throw at him."

"Whatever. This is just us getting the lay of the land anyway." With that, Jabra smirked over at the youngest CP9 member, Nero. "Look, I know you got an eye for the ladies. That's cool. I've got that too, and if you ever want some tips, I'll cheerfully share my flirting knowledge with you."

"Exactly! Then you will know precisely what not to do, both when flirting and in a relationship Chapapa!" Fukuro interjected.

"Damn you, shut up Fukuro!" Looking back at the younger man, Jabra became serious again. "But this is a big mission, possibly the biggest we've ever gotten, so try to keep your eyes on the prize. Although," he had laughed, slapping the younger man on his shoulder. "Nico Robin and the unknown female pirate are both supposed to be beauties, so maybe you can mix business with pleasure."

Then, with a sigh, Jabra had turned to Kumadori. "Alright, Kumadori. Do your magic."

He and the younger man had changed into local clothing, discarding the outfits they'd worn to the island and Kumadori helped changed their hair.

There was a key to this. As any undercover agent could tell you, if a person changed their hair and general demeanor along with their clothing, the spy was halfway to being an entirely different person. Jabra added to this by working some white into his beard to go with his equally whitened hair while the younger man shaved his whiskers and removed his earrings. He looked a little out of sorts because of that but also looked like an entirely new person.

Now Jabra stood at the window, watching as pirate hunters Zoro, unnamed female pirate, and another woman, undoubtedly another crew member, with them left the dockyard, frowning pensively. "I suppose I could try to attack them right now, but with Galley-La company so close, I don't think I'd like those odds."

Despite all of his bluster, humor and arrogance, when it came down to dirty tricks and strategy, Jabra was actually one of the best in CP9. And he never took on a fight unless he had a chance for outright victory. But that left Jabra twiddling his fingers until the meeting tonight.

Benjamin had been adamant about that. Shaking his head, Jabra decided against following the pirates. It wouldn't serve any purpose, not just yet.

Still, the government is paying for this, so... With that, he rang the front desk of the casino and requested them to send up a few joy girls. If I'm going to be stuck here for a bit, I might as well have some fun.

OOOOOOO

The first clothing store they had visited hadn't had that Laki had wanted. She made a lot of it looked good, but it wasn't really her. Although some of the swimsuits were interesting, and Laki bought two of them. Laki had even modeled one for Sanji and the worker in the store, both of whom gushed about it.

The other was a little too daring for her to where in front of strangers, but she was looking forward to Sanji and maybe the other men aboard the ship reaction she tried on later. *Just because I don't like showing my body off as much as Nami seems to, or even Robin for that matter, doesn't mean that I don't like compliments,* she thought, smiling cheerfully as she watched Chopper race ahead of them into the bookstore at the edge of the narrow street they had been following. It was one of very few they had seen so far.

She paused in following, causing Sanji to do the same when a man came out of the alleyway to one side, looking down at a watch on his wrist and not looking where he was going. Sanji and the man bumped into one another, nearly sending him stumbling. "Sorry about that," Sanji nodding to the other man.

The other man, a seemingly baby-faced youth with unfortunate front teeth and black hair, nodded back, glancing towards Laki. The man's eyes widened slightly at the sight of her wings, but then he smirked, winking at Sanji. "Chu, not a problem, my man, not a problem at all."

He moved past them, watching the front of the bookstore for a moment, but just as he was about to enter, Chopper came out, causing him to nearly collide with him in turn.

The man backed away, nodding to the little humanoid reindeer, then entered the bookstore himself.

Wondering, Nero moved to watch out of the windows as Chopper moved back to the other two. *I didn't recognize either of the others. Are they part of the Straw Hat Crew?* Still, at least their pet matches the photo I've seen.

Outside, Laki picked up several jewelry pieces, thinking about them and holding them up against her skin, and then a lock of her hair, frowning thoughtfully.

"I didn't think you were a big jewelry kind of person, not like Nami or Makino," Chopper said as he rejoined them.

She smiled down at Chopper, and Sanji patted him on the hat. "No luck?"

"Oh, there were many books there that I thought looked interesting, but no medical books. I found a few fantasy books I might buy myself as part of my allowance...." Chopper trailed off, frowning. "Wait a minute, what is my share of the loot the crew has, anyway?"

Sanji blinked, held up a finger, then let it drop. "You know what, that is a very good question. I have all the money we need for Laki's clothing and our supplies. So, I suppose I could use that to buy the books you wanted but we've never actually set out what share of the booty each of the crew member gets."

Chopper nodded at that, saying dryly, "Well, it's not as if we didn't have other things on her mind, you know."

Both of the others laughed, and Laki turned back to the owner of the small cart of jewelry. "In that case, you can pay for this, Sanji?" she said, holding up what looked like a bangle of some kind to Chopper made of hammered silver.

But Chopper's supposition of it being a bracelet or something similar was proven wrong when upon purchasing it for four hundred beli, she worked it around her ponytail, close to her head. This made the long ponytail stand out all the more.

"What do you think?" she inquired, posing slightly.

"It looks gorgeous on you, my dear," Sanji said, bowing grandly before sighing dramatically. "I think we should get the rest of our shopping done and head back to the ship before nightfall."

None of the three noticed the young man who had nearly bumped into and then winked at Sanji coming out of the bookstore and following them, the crowd of people moving around the small side street obscuring him from their sight.

Nero waited until his targets were back aboard their yagura bull-pulled boat. Then he took to the air, bouncing once into the air then using the rooftops to follow them, before dropping into an alleyway nearby when the Straw Hats had again disembarked.

Sanji bargained hard at several different stalls set up alongside the waterway, loading up the yagura bull with several different types of yeast, already premade bread and fruits before heading down a side street to a meat seller where he bought still more. A few streets later, they saw signs for a clothing store and left the bull behind, trusting the bull to watch their purchases after Chopper had a discussion with it.

The three of them and looking around, Laki smiled. "Now, this is more like it." This store didn't have a lot of real high-end stuff and didn't seem to sell dresses. Instead, it looked like it sold mostly men's clothing with a few leggings and pants designed for women.

"Why this kind of clothing?" Sanji frowned as he looked around in turn. "While your beauty is such it would shine if you clothed yourself in a burlap sack, none of this clothing looks to be attractive enough to accentuate your beauty further."

"I'm positive," Laki said with a nod. "I don't know styles really, but I know what I like."

Pouting discretely, Sanji wheedled, "Are you sure?"

Rolling her eyes, Laki smacked him upside the head. "None of that. Let me talk to the worker."

Laki came out of a dressing room a moment later, and Sanji scowled, shaking his head. Gone were the pink leggings that she wore under her skirt previously. Both skirt and leggings were replaced by a pair of pants. They were tight and didn't leave much room to the imagination regarding Laki's build but they were still pants. They still covered her glorious legs, and that was a travesty in his mind. *Wh, why pants?*

Seeing his expression, Laki snickered, shaking her head. "I'm not a skirt person most the time willingly," she said. "That's why I had those leggings the first place, but it was either skirt, leaves-skirts, or a single one piece that was just so unattractive, it isn't even funny where I came from. "Besides, you know my dial-based combat is based around a lot of leg movement. I'd rather not flash my panties every time I have to do a kick or flip from one cloud road to another."

Sanji's eyes glazed for a moment, and Laki let him imagine it before a moment before snapping her fingers in front of his face. "Come back to me, come back to me!"

"But but, pants," Sanji whimpered, and Laki laughed again, ruffling his hair.

That caused him to snap out of it again, and he pushed her hand away, combing his hair back into its normal eye-covering look. "Besides, it's not like I'm not going to get anything that doesn't show off my feminine side," Laki said, wondering why Sanji was so adamant that his eye be covered.

She bought several pants there and then headed next door to a store specializing in tops and blouses. There, she bought a tube top, which hugged her upper body but left her arms bare from the shoulders down, and whose whiteness set off her small wings to some degree. Sanji stared, agog, then began to clap. "Astounding, angelic, marvelous! You are a true beauty, my dear!"

Despite herself, Laki was enjoying this and laughed, shaking her head. "Keep your tongue in your mouth, horndog." Despite that, she was blushing just a tiny bit. Very few of the men in her tribe had ever made comments like that, especially after she had decided to follow the role of a warrior. It wasn't enough to turn her head as it had Conis, but it was still fun.

Laki bought several more shirts, including a few button-down shirts, that looked like vests in different types of colors. Her pants were all black or light purple, the same shade of the leggings Laki had been wearing before.

They soon left the store, yet none of the Straw Hats saw they were being observed. Nero was in turn surprised by Fukurou's landing on his shoulder. "Chapapa, you've had some luck, I see."

Gulping, Nero nodded. "The woman's got wings, like the file said the Skypieans are supposed to have. The man, though, I've got no clue who he is."

"That's Black Leg Sanji, of course, Chapapa."

"B, but he doesn't look anything like Black Leg's picture!" Nero protested.

"Really? Chapapa, I think the picture matches life exactly," Fukurou murmured.

"Should we attack, you think?" Nero didn't think they should, but he knew he was a junior officer here.

Thankfully Fukurou, while not as wary as Jabra, wasn't one to leap into things either. "No, or at least. Not entirely." He was staring down at a small crowd that had begun to gather around the three pirates. Dressed as she was now, Laki's good looks, and, moreover, her wings, stood out as more than some kind of fashion accessory, and the passionate side of the men in the town had been roused. "Chapapa, instead, I think there's an opportunity here."

Thanks to Laki's new clothing, the locals began to notice her far more than they had previously. Before, when they had begun to shop, only a few had tried to flirt with Laki. Now, she was being propositioned by every man who laid eyes on her. And all of it was about her wings, which had previously gone almost unremarked on.

"Oh beauteous Angel, come down to earth to bless us mere mortal with your beauty. I love you!"

"Milady, would you deign to have a meal with me.

Your wings are truly magnificent, and those muscles on your arms, I would love to sculpt you if you would just give me a chance!"

Even children were getting into it, staring at her wings as they moved, twitching this way and that due to her rising annoyance with the amount of attention she was getting. One of them looked over at her and pointing and saying, "It's an angel."

But then, the mother's response to this broke Laki's semi-paralysis at the crowding. "I don't think that an angel would be wearing pants, which look like they were painted on like that dear or a jacket that leaves her arms so bare."

It was true, Sanji reflected as he moved around Laki, kicking out - very lightly - to send a few of the pushier members of the crowd back into their fellows. Laki's blouse being open at the shoulders allowed for a decent amount of side-boob to be seen. It was lovely, but it wasn't a sight for just anyone. "Back, you bastards! I'll fillet the lot of you if you don't stop bothering Laki-chwan!"

Normally, Laki would have taken umbrage with the idea that she had to have someone protect her, but she wasn't carrying her rifle at the moment. *And my hand-to-hand skills suck. God, Luffy's right, I need to train more. Ugh. Still, this is the last time I go anywhere without my rifle. I mean, my pistol's nice, but still...*

With Chopper in the lead, they pushed through the crowd back to their yagura bull. The bull looked up at them, whinnying, and the crowd dispersed for the most part. But as it did, across the way, another man on the other side of the riverbank caught sight of Laki. He was a giant, almost egg-shaped man dressed in one of the local festival costumes. Despite his fat appearance, he moved quickly, leaping towards Laki over the waterway, clearing the distance easily. "Chapapa! Young Angel, take me to heaven, Chapapa!"

Sanji reacted before Laki could, taking a single step forward in launching himself into the air, his foot connecting hard with the fat man's stomach.

Right before Sanji's foot struck the other man, Laki noticed the fat man seemed to stiffen up a second, his hands coming together to press into one another. But it didn't help him, and he bounced off the far wall, then up into the air, then off another wall and over into an alleyway.

As the man disappeared into the darkness between tall buildings, Sanji landed on the boat so lightly that it barely moved. He took a drag from his cigarette and tamped the ash out over the side, commenting, "That was a perfect shot if I do say so myself."

Laki rolled her eyes but patted him on the shoulder. "Thanks for the help, but you know, it only counts if you called it, right?"

Sanji pouted at her, then the two of them quickly helped Chopper divest himself of their purchases into the boat and got in after Chopper transformed back to his normal form, hopping up onto the portion of the boat directly behind the yagura bull.

“So, we’ve got enough food for now, and you, milady, have a new wardrobe, and Chopper wants to wait on books until he knows how much he can spend, which means we’re done. Do either of you want to go back to the ship?” Sanji asked.

“I’d rather wait a bit on that,” Laki answered quickly. “Remember, this is only the third island I’ve ever been on and I love these little yagura bulls. Let’s do some exploring.”

“As the lady wishes,” Sanji laughed, looking over at Chopper.

The human Zoan communicated with the bull, who nodded its head in understanding. Then they were off, moving slowly, stopping occasionally here and there as they went.

Behind the Straw Hats, Nero watched until they left, then leaped over a few rooftops before dropping into the alleyway next to Fukurou. “What the heck was that about?”

Grumbling, Fukurou pushed himself up with some difficulty from where he had crashed into and almost through a wall. He’d literally made a dent in the wood, but Fukurou had shifted to Tekkai from his own specialty of Te-Awase the instant he was out of sight of the pirates, so the last few bounces hadn’t hurt him. “Chapapa, that kick, that kick was something else, Chapapa!” he said aloud, stumbling, causing Nero to grab his arm to keep Fukurou from stumbling.

Fukurou reflected that very few CP9 members would’ve done that, but he nodded his thanks to the younger man all the same as Nero repeated himself, “What were you doing? If you wanted us to attack him, that was a really weird way of doing it.”

“Chapapa, I know a technique called Te-Awase that allows me to discover the strength the physical strength of an individual who has struck me. I had hoped to get all three of them to hit me, but Black Leg proved too fast, and his blow a little too strong for me to bounce back towards them, Chapapa,” Fukurou admitted.

“And is this technique supposed to hurt you?” Nero questioned.

“Chapapa! No. And that’s not a good thing. Chapapa!”

“No shit,” Nero muttered, letting Fukurou lean in his arm as he moved away, deeper into the alleyways of Water 7.

OOOOOO

Once he had decided to meet with Franky directly, Luffy had turned, moving the ship into an exercise for Resolve. “We learned in that storm that you can do more than one thing at a time. Now we just need to be able to train it to a higher degree. The more you can do at a time, the better you’ll be able to do in a fight.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I think this is just laziness on your part,” Resolve muttered before disappearing.

“Oy! You’ve seen how much time I spent training the crew and myself, lazy is...”

“OH, so that’s it!” Resolve suddenly appeared out from the wheel Luffy had been, her half-n’-half upper body thrusting out of the wheel like it was water, the marine side’s hand wagging in front of Luffy’s face. “You just want more time available for sparring, so you want me to take over portions of the crew’s regular duties. Well, I’m onto you, captain!”

Luffy laughed at that, while nearby, Robin chuckled. Still, Resolve did follow Luffy’s orders, while Luffy went down to the cargo hold. Above, Robin explained where they wanted to go, while also using her power to take soundings as they moved around the island, moving in the same direction they had around the island to get to the port from where they had first approached the island.

The frigate had three decks. The hold was the bottommost deck, with a thin area directly below that for bilges. The second deck was the living quarters, while the third was the gun deck, the showers, and the mess hall, although that had changed now. The bottommost deck, the hold, was the level of the ship where the Jet Dials had been positioned.

His hand against the wall, Luffy felt how the ship responded, how it twitched this way and that in comparison as Resolve used the jet dials to move around the island. He could feel the wood thrumming with every use of the Jet Dials and scowl in annoyance. *Kaku was right, darn it, I never noticed before.* “How are you feeling, Resolve? Is this bothering you?”

“Not really?” Resolve’s voice echoed around the hold from everywhere at once, sounding hesitant as speaking was just another thing the Klabautermann had to concentrate on. “I mean, it, it feels like I’m trying to use muscles I don’t actually have yet, but that’s about it... it’s kind of uncomfortable, but not really.”

“But it could become uncomfortable in time, right? I mean, this isn’t a muscle you can build up, is it?” Luffy murmured, frowning.

“Ah... yeah, I think that’s accurate. Wow, putting stuff into human terms is annoying. Sorry, remember this is all new to me too,” Resolve responded, her voice still strained.

“Keep at it Resolve, I think that we’ll have to redo these a bit, but you’re doing great now.”

“Yeah, well, just keep those morons unconscious. That’s all I ask,” Resolve grumbled.

Luffy laughed at that but had to bring up something he had noticed. “Actually, what is with that? You could have dealt with them a lot more aggressively now that you’re fully formed and everything and you’re a part of our crew.”

“That’s nice, and he really is, but it also is so much silliness. I’m a Klabautermann. We’re not supposed to be seen. I can get by with you all seeing me because you’re my crew and because of how you treated me since I first appeared. And honestly, because it’s fun to be able to interact with you guys openly. But the Franky Fools are not part of my crew. They attempted to board me. They’re enemies! I couldn’t force myself to do anything obvious to them, let alone physically appear. It was like, like...”

The spirit of the ship trailed off, trying to explain. “It was. I just couldn’t do it, that’s all. I can’t put it better than that. There’s a hard limit I can’t get past.”

“Hmmm.... So. wait, if you can’t do anything major, then can you be used in battle at all? We’ve been talking about getting you better weapons and all, after all,” Luffy questioned, suddenly worried.

“I can,” Resolve answered firmly, her marine side in full control of the voice. “It is being seen by non-crewmembers that is an issue. I will be able to fire the cannons and even move the ship in battle. I will get better over time, captain. I promise.” Then her personality shifted once more, her pirate side now coming out once more despite her body still being invisible. “I really want to take out enemy ships on my own!”

Luffy patted the wall companionably. “I believe you, Ressay, and I’m sorry if it sounded as if I doubted you.”

“Thanks, captain, but don’t think that being nice is enough to make me overlook that lame name!” Resolve growled.

Chuckling, Luffy moved around the hold, frowning as he continued to feel the wood thrumming in time with the use of the Jet Dials. *So thicker planks, or a dedicated solid structure, like an added level?* As he was thinking about it, a series of eyes appeared nearby, followed by a mouth appearing on Luffy’s shoulder.

“Luffy, I think we’re close enough to see the Franky House. You may wish to come up here,” Robin said a moment later.

Nodding towards the nearest eyeball, Luffy turned and made it up to the main deck. Robin met him coming down from the crow’s nest, handing the spyglass to him. “You should be able to see it from the deck with this.

OOOOOOO

The top of Franky House had a small series of viewing slits, where one of the Franky Family members could keep a lookout. Most of the time, this was worthless, and the duty amounted to punishment detail. The man on it right now had been set to that work when he had accidentally barfed on Franky's shoes. He was sitting there rather glumly up until he spotted a ship actually moving towards the Franky House, moving along the shoreline as best it could, leaving behind the town of Water 7 behind them. "Oy, Aniki (big brother/senior/boss)! There's a ship coming towards us. It looks like a pirate frigate."

"Eh? They gotta have a death wish coming to us like that, baka~," a man sitting at the Franky House's bar said, chugging down a cola. He wiped his mouth with a massive hand, larger than his own head. This man was Franky, the head of the Franky Family.

"Aniki, you want us to deal with it?" another man volunteered. This man was much taller than the first, although, ironically, his hands were smaller than the one who had just finished off his cola.

"What do you think, baka, you lot are the Kairiki Destroyers, ain't ya? Don't think I'm gonna stop my partying just for a single measly ship," Franky replied, eliciting a cheer from the man who had spoken and his two equally large companions at the trust their boss was showing them.

OOOOOO

The Franky House was built on a promontory, well away from the rest of the island, in what looked almost like a dump for old ship parts and construction castoffs, but not quite, the trash being too spread out. Although, that might have been because of the amount of trash used to make the Franky House. It looked like a scrapheap had been hollowed into a house, than a giant, garish sign had been stuck on it. Nearby, two massive yagura bulls sat in the water, with one of their necks slanted, so it entered the building, while the other one was bobbing its head to the music blaring out of the house.

Judging by the music and the shouts from within, Luffy had to wonder if, instead of a house as the sign declared, it was a casino or a frat house. *Hard to tell without seeing the inside, really. Although, I guess it being both makes as much sense as anything else.*

It was perhaps the most amusing thing that Luffy had seen since Jaya and the half-house of Cricket's, and standing at the prow, he looked over at Robin. She was looking at the yagura bull bopping to the music, cocking her head to one side. "My, that is actually quite cute. Although, something must be done to educate that poor animal on what good music is like."

"What is your preferred music anyway?" That was one of the areas they hadn't actually talked about at this point. Most of their discussions had to do with messy things like feelings or the future or the crew in general, or combat, Luffy's favorite, obviously. They hadn't yet talked

about music. "That seems to be the kind of thing that a boyfriend should ask since I might need to know if I tried to set up any kind of formal off the prototype date."

Smiling at that, Robin nodded, then admitted to being a fan of violin music of many types. "It is an extremely versatile instrument, and he can be both romantic and **stimulating**. That and jazz in general."

Somehow, the way that she said stimulating made Luffy nearly stand at attention, and not just by standing up straight either. Smirking, Robin sent him a heady look before frowning slightly as the music became louder for a moment, the doors to the house having opened.

As the pirates watched, several giant people came out of the building, moving toward the Resolve. They were easily two or three times the size of a normal man, although built along the same general lines. Two wore goggles, the last one, who had violet-colored hair, wore sunglasses and a hat. They all wielded weapons sized up to fit them and then some.

A moment later, the large yagura bull that had stuck his head inside stood up straight. He and his fellow moved to one side, growling and whinnying in equine anger. They still looked extremely cute to Robin and she smiled at them. Although oddly enough, the three larger gangster types were alone beyond the bulls. None of the other inhabitants of the house had come out just yet.

"You people must be stupid!" bellowed one of the giants, shaking his head as he pointed to himself and his brothers." Still, if you want your ship destroyed, then we Kairiki Destroyers are more than happy to perform that little service right here!"

The picture of unconcern, Luffy and Robin watched as what was basically a wall made of cannons was rolled out and pointed their way. "That's actually kind of cool looking."

"Really, I think it's quite tacky," Robin muttered, shaking her head.

"Okay, so not so much that it is cool but that it has possibilities," Luffy admitted changing his opinion slightly. "It could be a great training tool."

"Oh, of course, you're 'anything can be training' idea," Robin chuckled.

"Resolve, halt Jet Dials," Luffy ordered, moving over to the nearby anchor. He waited until he felt the ship's momentum slowing, then dropping the anchor, slowing the ship to a halt as it caught on the rocks below the ship.

"Do you want in on this?" Luffy began, turning back to Robin, only to stare over Robin's head as she had turned away from him and was now looking out to the ocean and the two large bowls. One of them was laughing as dozens of hands moved around it, tickling it in different

places as it thrashed in the water. The other was having almost as much fun, its head and neck being stroked by dozens of other hands.

“I somehow feel that’s cheating,” Luffy muttered.

The trio of Kairiki Destroyers hadn’t noticed what had happened to the yagura bulls. Instead, they were still laughing at Robin and Luffy coming here all alone on their ship. “Oh, god, they’ve even stopped moving now. Are you trying to make this easy?” With that, the man who had pulled the odd contraption out pulled at a rope, which led to several dozen others leading up to each cannon that made up the cannon ball. An instant later, it fired.

Leaping into the air, Luffy smashed aside the dozens of cannonballs, his hands flickering this way and that as he did indeed make it into a training exercise. His arms glowed with electrical energy as he used his Geppo skill in conjunction with his new Logia ability in only his arms. *Now, the trick is, make the arms lightning, but keep the hands normal. Keep the arms lightning, but keep the hands normal,* he repeated mentally, forcing his body to obey.

The dozens of cannonballs that were shot towards the ship were all batted aside up into the air or over the ship instead, and Luffy whooped for a second in delight even as he shattered a few of the cannonballs in midair, causing an explosion that covered the area between the ship and the shooters in momentary fog. *Yes! I’m getting better at that. Freaking Enel only caring about Kenbunshoku and overpowered attacks. The speed of this technique is insane!*

With that, Luffy disappeared in a crackle of lightning.

Smoke from the wall of cannons that the so-called Kairiki Destroyers had brought out had blinded the three giants, although they were still laughing. “I don’t know why you used that thing, admittedly it is kind of fun to smash the ship all at once, but come on, sharing is caring.”

“How about you two get the next two ships then? I’ll pick up the flotsam from this one.”

“That’s better, although I still have to wonder what that big ball thing on the ship was, it almost looked like people for some reason to me,” the last Kairiki Destroyer muttered, frowning. Unlike his fellows, he had seen the ball of trussed up and blinded prisoners that Robin and Luffy had formed their prisoners into, stuffed between two of the masts. For a moment, the Kairiki Destroyer almost thought... *But that’s impossible, right?*

Before the man could voice his concerns, Luffy appeared right in front of them, grinning cheerfully up at them.

The goggles-wearing Kairiki Destroyer had barely a moment to open his mouth before Luffy had launched himself up off of the ground, thrusting out his fist.

No Busoshoku was needed here. It was simply pure muscle power and the man was struck in the gut. His armor, which had been made to stand up to cannons, was shattered. The one with an afro was then thrown over the house to land with a thump on the other side. The other two, slower on the uptake, didn't even have a chance to open their mouths before they were smashed aside.

With that done, Luffy turned to look at the ship, only to find that Robin was already removing the giant ball of prisoners, rolling it along up over the railing and then down through a series of several hundred hands. Luffy took it from the other side of the banister and then hopped back over to the shore. "Resolve, if those bulls recover from Robin's attack, you are free to defend yourself. Your guns are loaded, and you can fire if you feel threatened, up anchor and away if some of them get behind us. "Robin, would you like to stay or come with me?"

"I believe I will come with you," Robin said with a chuckle, watching as he hefted the people ball, then looked at the people who are slowly waking up within it, then back to the door past the unconscious or groaning giant people. smiling wickedly up at them, Luffy smirked into the face of the prisoner who had apparently been the leader of this group. "So, which is going to give first, you guys, or that door?"

"Wait, what?" Zambai muttered groggily. He and a few of the other prisoners had woken up thanks to the jostling.

One of his friends was much more on the ball. "Wait, are you thinking....oh god! Please, don't! Think of the children!"

Luffy blinked at that last, cocking his head to one side. "Do you actually have children?"

"No, but I'd like to at some point! Being alive is sort of a requirement for that!" the man quavered.

Luffy snorted but then nodded and sat the ball of prisoners down. "I was just joking, guys. I wouldn't do that to someone. It would be inhumane in the extreme."

Luffy's use of the word 'inhumane' would have been a sign something was up for anyone who knew him. But Robin was extremely amused to note that the Franky Fools, as Resolve called them, actually sighed in relief.

Then Luffy smirked and lifted them over his head again. "Oh wait, pirate!"

The ball of people screamed as he hurled them forward. Robin, however, ignored that, and the scream of them smashing into the door, which had already begun to open, many of the people inside had begun to rush out after seeing what had happened to the giants. Instead, she looked up at Luffy, her eyes narrowed. "That's my line."

Sensing Robin was actually annoyed with him a bit, Luffy glanced away, staring at the carnage in front of the Franky house. That reminded him of something else, and he gestured back to the ship. "By the way, how did you do move the big ball o' morons?"

Sufficiently diverted, Robin shrugged. "It was rather difficult to get it going, but I was able to use our leg training to launch what you call a soft Rankyaku to get them moving. After which, it was just a matter of having enough hands."

After blinking in surprise, Luffy smiled widely Robin, causing her to twitch slightly. "Awesome. Rankyaku is a prerequisite to learning Geppo, which is a huge agility modifier. If you can already do a soft Rankyaku, were going to push hard to get you to using Geppo while we're here. It'll be tough, and your legs will be cursing your name by the time we're done, but it is worth it."

Gulping, Robin shook her head, somewhat thrown off, as always, by the sheer delight Luffy took in training. "That doesn't sound very pleasant."

"Massages every night," Luffy answered firmly. "And we'll move our stuff in together into a single room except for your books, so it's easier," Luffy then grinned, slapping one hand into the other palm, ignoring how the rest of the Franky Fools had begun to recover, boiling out of the now-battered house. "In fact, if we do that, your room can become your library, and my room ours, how's that?"

Robin laughed and agreed with that, wondering aloud if maybe they could add the need for a library and sitting room into the plans for the *Resolve's* reconstruction.

"Hey, you suuuuper morons! Stop it with the flirting!" shouted a voice, turning Robin Luffy's attention back to the Franky fools. A wide stage had been set up in their midst, on which stood Franky and two girls.

The girls looked almost identical save for their eye color, one having brown eyes, the other green. They both had long, pointed noses, and their hair, black for both of them, was cut into squares for some reason. One wore a yellow bikini top and pants, along with a yellow visor. The other one wore a purple tube top, long pink gloves and a purple bikini bottom covered by a pink sash. Both were posing currently, leaning forward, their arms below their chests moving in a rotating circle around themselves. At their waists, the girls bore a single, oversized katana each.

The man, though, was even more of a sight.

He was a powerfully built man standing at least two feet taller than the women to either side of him, maybe more, it was hard to tell. His forearms were just enormous, especially in comparison to his upper arms and the width of his shoulders. The man's brightly-colored blue hair stuck up in a crazy, almost gangster-like look, and he had blue star tattoos on his forearms.

The guy's chin was also very angular, coming to three distinct points. His nose looked to be made of iron with several rivets visible.

He also, alas, wore a pair of swimming briefs, showing off incredibly hairy, somewhat thin, bandy legs. This was coupled with a loud floral shirt with a large gold chain necklace around his neck. All in all, he was easily one of the most bizarre men Luffy had yet seen.

As the two pirates watched, the trio went through a series of movements, all of them moving as one, while around them, the rest of the Franky Family spread out, weapons in their hands. Although after the losses they had sustained in attacking the Resolve, there were only around thirty of them plus the eponymous Franky and the two girls.

While the trio danced, Franky began to speak. "You might have started this show, OW! But now, Wow! It's Franky's time! You mess with the Franky Family, you mess with Franky himself and I'm feeling suuupppeeer!!" With the last word, the trio had formed a pose, their arms outstretched to one side at an angle, with Franky's forearms crashed together to the sound of metal, his arms connecting two tattoos into one star-shaped one as he scowled at the two pirates.

Staring at it, Luffy held up a seven out of ten. "It wasn't bad, and your choreography is top-notch. The last pose was good too. But you lose points because you don't have background music and because your lines don't scan very well. Work on that, and maybe you'll be bumped up to a nine out of ten. The last point I deducted, it's got to be said, is because of your legs. They are disgusting and no one will ever want to see them. Put on some pants, man!"

"I agree," Robin said firmly, holding a five out of ten. "Although I took off far more points than one for those... hairy monstrosities. A word of advice is not just men who appreciate good leg care." Robin then shivered a bit as she looked at the man, and more importantly, what he was wearing, before shaking her head, thankful that Makino wasn't here. Good grief, she would lose her mind at the number of fashion don'ts he is performing all at once. "I also removed points because of how your outfits, particularly you, Franky, clash. The two young ladies' outfits are at least an interesting contrast to one another. But you... no. Just no."

Ow! You're a saucy wench I'll give ya, and ya might have a sense of humor, but that ain't gonna save you now!" Franky roared, pulling out a massive bazooka, the width of its barrel easily larger than any of the cannons in the cannon wall lying nearby. "Get 'em, boys!" With that, Franky fired the giant bazooka and the battle was joined.

Luffy charged forward towards the crowd of advancing gangsters, no longer using even a bit of his lightning power. There was no need here, and the fewer people knew about Luffy's eating the Lightning Fruit, the better. "The names Monkey D. Luffy, and you lot are the ones who picked this fight when you tried to mess with our ship and our crew!"

The next instant, Luffy smashed the cannonball out of the way to explode out harmlessly out over the ocean, then he crashed into the front line of the Franky Family. Behind him, Robin kept her distance, but hundreds of summoned arms appeared throughout the crowd. Even as those arms started to choke people into unconsciousness, though, Robin spoke in a calm tone of voice to Luffy via a mouth that appeared on his shoulder. "By the way, I thought we were going to try to do this peacefully."

"This is Luffy-style peaceful, Robin. Beat the enemy down quick, then buy them drinks after, while you make your requests!" Luffy answered back as the Franky Family melted in front of him thanks to Robin's efforts.

"I wasn't arguing, merely making an observation." Like Makino, Robin was an expert negotiator and knew that it was always good to negotiate from a position of strength.

Robin moved behind Luffy, crossing her arms and constructing dozens of hands which rose behind the ball of people, smacking it into the now open doorway, as the group of men groaned and moaned.

Having been about to rush forward, Franky paused, staring over the heads of his family and the pirate smashing his way through them toward the woman at the back. "Wait, Nico Robin!" Franky exclaimed, staring at the woman in distrust. But then he had to get his mind back in the fight as Luffy smashed aside one of his family members and leaped forward. Franky punched out hard, dodging what he thought would have been a kick.

Luffy, though, somehow twisted out of the way of the punch, one hand lightly tapping down on it. Luffy's other arm lashed out, his hand clamping down on Franky's face. Luffy then twisted, slamming Franky face-first into one of the other Franky Family grunts. Using that grip, he flipped himself upwards, a foot lashing out with such force that not only was Franky's bazooka smashed out of his grip, but the bazooka barrel became bent in half.

Luffy was then back on the ground and grabbed Franky's fist coming his way, holding it, then pushing it to one side, ducking under Franky's range, punching upwards directly into Franky's chest. As he did, Luffy's eyes widened. "Damn, what are you made of!?"

"Cola, spice, and nothing nice, all suupper!" Franky retorted. He grabbed at Luffy, twisted, and then hurled him away.

By this point, Robin's crowd clearance had downed most of the Franky Family, bar a few of the faster, better-trained members. None of the ones she had knocked out was all that hurt, but they were certainly out of it now. But this simply seemed to clear the way for Franky. And Franky was even more unusual than his looks suggested. He got to his feet and held up one arm, pulling off a thin veneer of rubber from his actual hand, which was made of metal. "Strong Right!"

One of his fists exploded outwards, connected to the rest of his arm via a chain, slamming into Luffy with all the force of a piledriver. Luffy had looked away for a second to wrench the sword of one of the two girls out of her grip, using a finger to flick her in the head. The girl had stumbled, flinching at the pain of that simple flick and Luffy turned at Franky's shout.

Luffy grunted, taking the blow and staggering backward, and then Franky was on him, a fireball coming from his mouth, that Luffy had to dissipate quickly, slamming his hands together in front of his face, creating a shockwave of air. On the heels of the fireball, Franky slammed into Luffy, taking him to the floor and pounding on Luffy several times as his legs started to come apart to grab onto Luffy and keep him still.

Luffy grunted under two more blows, then used Tekkai. "Tekkai!"

The next dozen blows no longer hurt, and when Franky reeled in his fist, for a point-blank Strong right, Luffy broke the man's grim grabbed the chain just behind his wrist, pulling him in. But Franky's next fireball nearly took Luffy by surprise, but he leaped up over it, and landed behind Franky, kicking his legs out from under him, eliciting a shot of real pain from the pain. "Ow, that hurt!"

Despite that shout, Franky twisted around, punching out and then sending a cannonball at Luffy's head. The cannonball struck, exploding but doing little damage. Instead, when the cloud of smoke disappeared, Luffy stared at Franky with admiration gleaming in his eyes. "You've made yourself into a cyborg!" Luffy announced, dodging another series of Franky's punches. "That's so cool!"

"Really," Robin muttered from nearby. "I don't see it frankly. And those Speedos are still disgusting. I think if we are going to interact with this man further, I will insist he wears some pants."

"Death to the pants lover!" Franky bellowed, turning to her and firing off several small pellets from the same hand that had previously launched a cannonball. The cannonball had come from his forearm, fired when Franky's hand had twisted to one side, moving like a door on a hinge. These came from his knuckles, the knuckles having popped open to allow the bullets to fire out.

Luffy dodged in front of the rain of pellets, catching them in his hands even as he fell back towards Robin. He then held them in one hand, using his new Lightning fruit powers for the first time. Holding them in his clenched hand, Luffy then started to send small electrical currents between his fingers, melting the balls into one, which he dropped still heated to the ground. Robin finished off the last girl as it hit, pinning her in place and holding her there with still more conjured hands.

Franky didn't let up, shouting out, "Strong Right!" Luffy had noticed that his hand had once more been reeled in, the action having been automatic somehow, and was now racing towards him once more.

Sighing, Luffy intoned, "Tekkai!" And took the next few blows before letting the technique go and wiping at his chest dramatically. "So, are we done posturing now?"

Scowling, Franky Scott sighed, was about to shout something back at him, but then Zambai came too nearby, grumbling and pushing at the elbow of one of his fellows, which had been pushing into his neck at an unpleasant angle. "Ugh, wh, what hit me... oh yeah..." his eyes widened as he looked around him and then over at Franky. "Aniki!"

Franky glared at Luffy, shaking his head as still more of his family started to come to all around them. "You didn't kill them. But if you think that's enough to put you on my good side..."

"Ehh, I figure getting on your good side was an impossibility about the time I dealt with your so-called Kairiki Destroyers. Ya might want to mess a bit with your gunpowder recipe. By the way, there's way too much smoke, not enough bang."

Robin giggled, shaking her head, and Luffy scowled over at her, a faint blush appearing on his face. "Oy, you know what I meant. Honestly, Robin, that was such a Sanji thing to laugh at."

At that, Robin gasped in mocking shock, but Luffy had already turned back to Franky. "Like I said before we tangled. You lot started this. I just decided to cut out the middleman and come see you and ask you kindly to stop..."

"Kindly!?" Franky interrupted, looking around at the wreckage of his family. True, none of them looked all that hurt, not even from the group of rolled-up prisoners who had been hurled at his front door. That was because the door had already been unlocked and opening, but still, it was astonishing how even the Kairiki Destroyers were merely battered. Heck, even his super bulls were alright. Indeed, they didn't look hurt at all. Instead, they were now looking at him somewhat sheepishly for some reason.

"Oh, you want to try unkindly?" Luffy quipped. And suddenly, there was a pressure building up in his gaze as he looked at Franky. "We can do that, although I would think after this, you'd be more interested in the business we might offer you."

"We even bring gifts," Robin added, her words diffusing the pressure that Franky had been feeling.

Looking around, he wasn't the only one who had been feeling it, and most of his family members who had roused themselves now looked sick almost, shivering in place. Whatever

that had been, it had been bad. Really bad, and Franky decided that just this once, he would swallow his pride and not try to stand on principles here, and he raised one large hand to push his now drooping hair out of his face. "Fine, what the hell kind of gifts you bring, and what kind of business? And, and who the hell are you?"

"I thought I shouted that at the beginning of this little party," Luffy mused, but when Franky still looked at him blankly, Luffy just grinned a grin that seemed to, in itself, be a challenge thrown at the feet of the world. "I am Monkey D. Luffy, captain of the Straw Hat Pirates, and the man who will be the Pirate King."

Franky, Zambai, and the others among the Franky Family could only stare at the young man in utter astonishment while Robin chuckled into one of her hands.

Moments later, most of the conscious members of the Franky Family were moving around the area where the fight had occurred, gathering up their still comatose fellows. Franky, Zambai, Mozu and Kiwi and the two pirates had moved inside Franky House. Things were still extremely tense between them, but they started to thaw as Robin sat down and began to use her powers to help move their fellows around and even pick up some of the debris inside, which had been caused when the doors had been smashed inward.

It thawed further when Luffy pulled the gift Robin had chosen for this meeting. It was a bottle of wine, and he tossed it to Franky, who caught it, shaking his head and passing it to Kiwi, coasting it down the bar towards her. She caught it blinked in surprise at the label, and set it down. "It's a good year and vintage, waina."

Franky scoffed, reaching behind the bar and pulling out a few bottles of cola. "I prefer cola." Luffy and Robin watched as Franky opened his chest and slid the new cola bottles into position into what Luffy first thought of like a fridge before he clicked the bottles into place. Seconds later, the blue hair that had been flopping in front of his face straightened up under its own power into his normal coif. "SUUUUPPEERRRR!!!" he yelled, slamming one hand against his chest. "I am revived!"

"Damn, but that is freaking awesome!" Luffy laughed. "You're a freaking cyborg. How awesome is that! That's one of mankind's dreams right there!"

"And again, I just don't see it," Robin sighed. "I suppose it must be a boy thing."

"Oh heck no, you just don't have any sense of style. Tell her, Kiwi, Mozu!" Franky exclaimed, shaking his head. He frowned as both girls looked away, not able to meet his eyes. "Oh, come on!"

Mozu waved her hands from side to side. "You're really cool, Aniki! It's just, for all the reasons of why you're cool, you're being a cyborg is the least of them waina,"

“Ahaha, that’s right, even if you take away my being a cyborg, I’m still suuupperrr!” Franky shouted, to which everyone else bar the two pirates agreement. Franky then led the two pirates over to a booth set against the far wall, with the girls following after, taking a seat nearby. Once he sat down, Franky shook his head and looked at the two pirates suspiciously, particularly Nico Robin. “All right, exactly what are you looking for here? Just an agreement not to attack you? You didn’t have to bring the wine for that. Kicking our collective asses was enough for that.”

“We’re looking for information,” Luffy answered simply, sitting down across from the man. “We have a ship, and we are looking for the proper shipwright to do what amounts to a full rebuild on it.”

“I don’t build ships,” Franky snorted, leaning back and crossing his arms as he rested his feet on the table. “You want Iceburg up in the main area. His Galley-La company are the best shipwrights you’ll ever find, here in Paradise or even in the New World.”

“My people met with him, but we have certain... items. And, frankly, what we want most is to add to our ship’s offensive firepower. We want guns,” Luffy shrugged. “Good ones and we’ve got a lot of interesting material to make them with. Now...” Luffy leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the table as Franky had. “When I was young, old man Shanks came to our little island, and he mentioned who had built the Oro Jackson, old Tom, the cowfish merman. He then mentioned the guy’s two apprentices.”

Franky snored. “Yeah, I know the story, and the amount of trouble being known as the island which built the Pirate King’s ship brought Water 7. But again, I don’t know why you want to do business with me. Iceburg’s Old Tom’s last surviving apprentice.”

“He’s already refused to work on our ship directly. And I figure, why settle for second best when a bit of work might still let me find a better option? But even if he was willing to do the work, Shanks told me that the other apprentice, the one called Cutty Flam, was the one to go to for guns.”

While Zambai, who had joined them, and the two girls, were all looking confused, Robin caught something else for just a brief second. Some twitch in Franky’s face. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough for her to see. *Interesting.*

“He’s not around here any longer if the guy’s even alive in the first place.” Franky waved it off.

But Zambai was concentrating on something else. “Wait, who is this Shanks guy?” The moment he said the name, his eyes widened, and Franky nearly spat out some more cola he had just begun to drink. “You, you can’t mean... Red Hair Shanks!? The Yonko!?”

Luffy nodded, and Robin laughed quietly, reaching under Luffy's straw hat to ruffle his hair. "Perhaps you should tell him the rest."

"The rest," Franky echoed. "What rest?"

Luffy laughed and looked across at Franky. "Heh, if you thought my meeting Shanks was weird, ask me who my brother is."

Franky looked at him in confusion, but Kiwi laughed, leaning over the back of her seat as she looked between Zambai and Franky at Luffy. "Okay, I'll bite. Who is your brother? One of the other Yonko, maybe?"

"Nope. Close. My brother is Fire Fist Ace," Luffy announced with a grin.

For a moment, the area was silent, and then, everyone was shouting in shock, the two women the loudest, while Franky was simply gaping in shock. "Your brother is the first division commander of Whitebeard?!"

"That's right." Luffy nodded. "And let's just say that he and I are pretty close in strength, so don't feel too bad about all this," Luffy said, jokingly as he gestured around them.

"Stop it with the name-dropping Straw Hat." Franky shook his head. "You're going to give Kiwi and Mozu heart attacks. And I think you already killed Zambai."

"Fufufufu, we haven't even gotten the biggest one yet," Robin caroled. "Although admittedly from what I've been told, his last family member is the one Luffy gets along with the least."

"Heh, true that. Anyway, suffice it to say I am a pirate and regardless of my Gramps, I'm no friend of the world government. So, if you're hiding Cuddy Flam's location from the world government, you don't have to worry about me turning him in. That is the last thing I would ever do. Hell, I'm more likely to tell the WG to fuck off and die than anything else. It wouldn't be the first time I've decided to spit in the eye of the WG and it won't be the last."

Though none of the others could see it, as he had been speaking, Luffy had taken one of Robin's hands in his own, squeezing gently. She now smiled, a faint tender smile, squeezing back even as a tiny shudder of fear went through her. No matter what happened, what the WG would throw their way, the Straw Hats would face it together.

While he grinned at the sentiment, Franky shook his head. "Cutty's supposed to be dead. And even if he was alive, I'm not certain he'd want to meet with you, let alone work with you."

Robin nodded, watching Franky carefully. "If the World Government is indeed still after him, his precautions are necessary. But he might wish to work with us once he sees what we have to offer to help him build the ship in question. I'm not talking about the materials we want to use in the ship's construction. Would you like a demonstration?"

Shrugging, Franky nodded. "Heck, I'm always interested in new metals or whatever, but I don't see how that will convince me to help you find someone who might be dead. Still, show us what you got."

Luffy reached into his ki space, ignoring the shouts and exclamations of "What the hell," "That pocket isn't nearly that big," and his personal favorite, "Is that some kind of Devil Fruit? An endless space thing?"

"Close," Luffy pointed to the speaker, a guy with shoulder-length pink hair who was wearing sunglasses for some reason, "but no cigar. This is simply a technique, one anyone can learn."

"Really," Franky drawled, although you could see the gleam of avarice in his eyes. "This is the first I've ever seen anything like that."

Luffy shrugged. "Not my fault a lot of people aren't interested in learning."

Robin laughed at that while Franky rolled his eyes. "Get on with it. I'm still pissed off at the two of you for what you did to my underlings."

Nodding, Luffy hefted a few of the dials out of his ki space, setting them down. These come from Skypiea." He said aloud, causing even more shouts of surprise from the crowd around them. "This is a breath dial." He held it out, and from it came a blast of air. "This is the jet Dial." A harder blast. "This is a flame dial."

With each one, the rest of the surrounding Franky Family gaped all the harder. Only Zambai and a few of the most senior members had ever heard of dials, let alone seen so many different types. Franky, though, was unmoved, drawling, "What, no impact dials?"

Luffy looked at him sharply, and Franky shrugged his shoulders. "Those things aren't unknown to me. They're freaking rare true but are not entirely unknown." He then paused. "But if you've got enough to use in ship construction, do you have enough to sell. Those things can be sold for a heck of a lot more than their weight in gold."

"Yes, we've got lots of them. And a lot of nearly all types. Some of them are already installed on our ship. We have jet dials underneath the water, which can do quite a lot of things as you no doubt know, and breath dials just in case we lose wind power for whatever reason but don't want to use the jet dials."

Franky frowned and seems to unbending little, but he was still shaking his head. "That's all interesting, and everything, and maybe Cutty might be willing to send me some weapons designs to sell you. But working on your ship is the galley company thing, not us."

"What about some of these?" Luffy said, pulling out a complete suit from the Rainbow Mist island.

That caused Franky to gasp in delight, and he reached forward, grabbing it out of Luffy's hand, staring at it, twisting the arms this way and that. "Someone else's been working on this kind of thing! And this is a primitive flamethrower here. That's pretty cool. But this is a suit, what..."

He fell silent as Luffy brought out something else, a series of books with images on them, from within the Rainbow Mist. Luffy tried not to look at Robin as he did so, but could he still feel the glare from him for having gone into her library and taken those books without asking.

"We were in something called the Rainbow Mist, and while we didn't get away with too much in the way of treasure, we did get away with a lot in the way of knowledge."

Franky looked at the books, opening a few of them, staring inside at a few pictures within. In particular, he looked at a few of the weapons from one book that Luffy had gotten but which had been added to Robin's collection before looking at what looked like a kind of engine. "The advent of Turbines," Franky said aloud after reading the chapter's name, frowning as he looked at the images within. "Okay, again, that's interesting. But you could trust Galley-La company with all of this. As much as Iceburg pisses me off, he's put together a stout group of people."

"Maybe, maybe not. And if we can't find Cutty Flam, I suppose Iceburg and his people will have to do. But only if I could convince Iceburg himself to work on it, and as I said earlier, he doesn't want to do the work himself. Galley-La company is good, but the Oro Jackson was a legend. Luffy said with a shrug, although he was wondering why Iceburg pissed Franky off. "Still, if you're not interested, and you still won't tell us where Cutty Flam is or even try to find him for us, then I suppose we'll leave you. Without telling you the last of our secrets."

"You have more?" Franky was astonished. What they'd already shown him was still surprising in and of itself. The books on engineering and ship design would revolutionize shipbuilding. The among of dials were insane. Franky had never heard of anyone having that many dials to spare. Now to hear the Straw Hats had a third secret?

Luffy shrugged again, tapping the table between them. "You still haven't promised us anything. Why should I share all of our secrets?"

“Indeed, this needs to be a give and take. You might have something we want, an information network within Water 7 that could find a single individual. Yet you haven’t even decided to help us do so yet. Unless, of course, there is another reason why that is the case...” Robin mused, her eyes sharpening.

Franky froze for a second, glaring at her and Luffy. “What do you mean?”

“I do not mean anything. I am merely implying something,” Robin smiled thinly. “I am the last person to tell anyone they cannot leave their past behind.”

It should have meant nothing. It should have simply been a statement, something that Franky could wave off as being directed at ‘Cutty Flam’ instead of himself. Instead, he twitched once more and then Luffy understood what Robin was suggesting. He leaned back too, shrugging his shoulders as he smirked at Franky.

This caused Franky’s twitching to grow even worse. They knew. They knew his secret that he was Cutty Flam. That he was Tom’s problem child. *FUCK!!! What the hell, more than ten years of no one realizing the connection, and now these two come along and work it out in a single conversation!? And one of them is Nico Robin, someone who could...wait they don’t know about the bigger secret, the plans, they aren’t asking about that, they are just asking about the ship. And... well... she really isn’t anything like I figured she would be. It wouldn’t be the first fucking time the WG were blowing it out their ass.*

He had been silent for just a bit too long and exchanging a glance, Luffy pulled Robin to her feet. “Never mind, Franky. Just so long as we have an agreement that you lot won’t mess with us, we’ll be fine. For now, we’ll just go with Iceburg, I guess. Pity though, I bet if I could just get in contact with Cutty, I could show him something that might convince him to work with us. Besides the obvious, of course.”

“The obvious?” Zambai parroted back, completely lost at this point and wondering where the hell this conversation was.

Luffy laughed as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? The Oro Jackson proved itself to be the greatest and best ship ever made by sailing every ocean, seeing every island in the world regardless of weather, reef or current. If anyone could build a ship to match it, to become a legend, it would be Tom’s own apprentices, right? After all, what apprentice doesn’t dream about surpassing his master?”

At that, Franky’s eyes widened, and he found himself staring into Luffy’s eyes, seeing the challenge there. And a part of him, a part he had long buried woke up, like a bud that had just burst out of previously dead soil. Then Luffy went on, and that bud became a flower as old memories rose up within him. Old dreams...

“Still, I suppose the real reason I wanted to search for a possible dead man over going for the sure thing is that Iceburg, he seems to have settled down into his life here, seems to have settled down in all his mayoral glory. I just hoped that the remaining apprentice was someone who dreamed bigger. Who dreamed big enough to work on the Ship of the next Pirate King, like his master.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Luffy helped Robing out of the booth. “We’ll leave the ship here for now. We told the rest of the crew to come and meet with us here, so it makes no sense to move it again. If you change your mind about helping us find Cutty Flam, Franky, we’ll be right outside.”

Behind them, Franky stared at the table in front of him, his thoughts in turmoil. Watching Luffy walk away, his back to him, though, that scene caused something to crystalize in Franky’s mind. Before he knew it, he was standing up and moving after them, laying a strong hand on Luffy’s shoulders, noticing for the first time that the guy’s shoulders were much thinner than his own. *For such a thin guy, he’s ridiculously strong*, Franky thought, remembering how Luffy had tossed him around earlier.

“Wait just a damn moment! I might not be who you’re looking for, but you’re right. That idea, building a ship like that, sounds just SUUUUPPEERRR!!! And if you want something done super, you’ve come to the right guy!” Franky practically bellowed, grinning down at Luffy as he pushed his glasses up with one hand. “Let’s talk plans and resources in greater detail, yeah?”

OOOOOOO

Dark figures moved through the night of Water 7 so fast and so high up that few were even aware of any movement at all. And those who were, even among the locals, simply put it down to seagulls. Soon, three individuals arrived at Blueno’s bar, unseen by any. After all, only one of their covers could really be seen publicly entering any kind of bar, let alone a bar in the back alleys of Water 7.

Entering the back of the bar where their friend Blueno was the bartender, Rob Lucci was angry. No, he was furious. They had been here for five years to cover. Five years to work their way into Iceburg’s confidence, five years spent on this one, tiny island, where the World Government is derided and distrusted for the logical, just actions taken against Tom’s Workers years ago. Five years spent as a shipwright rather than acting as the hidden fist of Justice as he should have been. All to discover where the design of the superweapon Pluton had been hidden. And now, here came CP9 with new orders and new targets. Both of which could wreck everything they had worked so hard for.

But Rob Lucci was one of those men who became colder and more control the angrier he was. So none of it showed on his face as he pulled off his mask and stared at his fellow Cipher Pol 9 members. They were all drinking too but quietly, and Jabra smirked as the trio of local agents joined them, raising his glass towards Rob Lucci. "Yo, you damn cat, haven't seen you in years, but you still look as if you're as arrogant as ever."

"Fufufufu, you're the last one to talk to me about arrogance," the little bird perched on Rob Lucci's shoulder replied as Rob removed his mask and cape.

"Stop it with that shit. You know I hate that," Jabra growled, making a wringing motion with one hand. "Unless you want to lose that pigeon of yours?"

Rob Lucci's eyes didn't narrow, but a feeling in the air seemed to heighten as he cocked his head to one side, speaking for the first time. "Just try it, mongrel."

"What is going on?" Kalifa's dulcet tone rang out from the smallest of the three masked individuals, as she too removed her cloak. Then Kalifa pushed up her glasses, which she had been wearing underneath her mask. "I do not have time for your male egos, Jabra. Even being here like this is a severe breach of our cover."

"Not so severe as all that, unless you think that Iceburg is going to be rattling your doorknob tonight," joked Kaku, removing his mask and rubbing at his long, square nose.

Kalifa calmly clocked him upside the head, causing the long-nosed man no damage. "That's sexual harassment."

"The comment Kaku made, or what you secretly want Iceburg to do to you?" Jabra jibed. "We all know you have severe kinks, girl."

"Yoyoi! Don't take out the fact that you need to pay for companionship out on Kalifa, Jabra. That is not the way of Justice!" Kumadori intoned, stepping back from the table and gesticulating wildly.

Somehow, the back and forth and seeing his old rival's face allowed Rob to calm down, and he smirked back at Jabra, shaking his head. "Well, that aside what..."

Rob was interrupted as Fukurou hurled himself through the air towards him and the others. As he did, he crossed his hands in front of himself, his mouth zipped closed Fukurou muttered under his breath a technique that only he had ever really created. "Te-Awase."

Yet oddly enough, it looked as if Fukurou had been in a fight recently. There was still a bit of blood around his mouth, and he wasn't moving nearly as quickly as he should have been. Despite noticing that, Rob Lucci showed no mercy as he lashed out with a fist, smashing

Fukurou away. This was followed by Kaku and Kalifa both doing the same as Fukurou bounced towards them.

The man, who visibly was perhaps the oddest looking of the CP9 members, bounced off the walls silently, clever use of Geppo making certain that he never even touched the wall. He then bounced over to where he had been sitting before, and Kumadori turned to him, thrusting out one hand and then twisting his head this way and that like the Noh Actor he liked to dress up as. "Yoyoi! How is it?"

"This wasn't only about measuring everyone's strength, Chapapa," Fukurou began, wincing slightly as he looked around at the others. "I tested Blueno earlier, but he wasn't the only one I tested. I also tested Nero and Black Legs Sanji. He was with the pet Chopper, and he looked exactly like the picture of him, Chapapa."

"We're gonna have to agree to disagree on that," muttered one of the others, a youngster that Rob had never seen before who he had been ignoring up to now. He looked at Jabra with one eyebrow rising, but Jabra waved off introductions, for now, staring at Fukurou. "You didn't mention that earlier when you got back."

"I only wanted to mention it once and put it into context, Chapapa."

"Wait, the Straw Hats are our target?" Kaku inquired, looking somewhat worried. "Is that what this is all about? The message Blueno sent us was deliberately vague."

"Yeah. But actually, I'm kind of interested now, too..." Jabra muttered, frowning. "Fine, Fukurou, tell us where we all rate in relation to Black Leg."

"On the Doriki levels, let me remind you, Doriki only measures someone's physical power. It doesn't take into account Devil Fruit powers or intelligence. Only physical strength. A common armed soldier has only ten Doriki. The lowest of us here, Nero, is at 380 Doriki, Chapapa."

"Chu, that's because I've only mastered four of the six Rokushiki yet," Nero grumbled. "I keep getting pulled off of training to..."

"Don't make excuses," Rob interrupted him coldly, staring the younger man down. "If you wish to be a member of CP9 rather than a liability, you must master all six techniques. It isn't just mandatory. It is what makes us CP9 in the first place." Honestly, if not for the unusual circumstances, Rob might well have killed Nero for that admission and daring to call himself a CP9 member. But he could put that off for now.

Nero gulped, but Jabra cut him off before he or any of the others could say anything. "Whatever. Go on Fukurou, we've got too much to talk about to waste time here."

“Chapapa, Right. Anyway, the only one here who hasn’t gotten any stronger is Blueno, at eight-hundred and twenty.”

Kaku nodded. “Pure strength has never been Blueno’s strong point, and with his work as a barman, he hasn’t had any real reason or opportunity to train more than necessary to keep up his current level of strength. Besides, his skill’s always lied in espionage and using the Door-Door fruit, which isn’t something Fukurou can.”

“But you are all stronger, Chapapa! Kalifa has risen by a hundred, to six-hundred and thirty.”

“Yoyoi, still the weakest by a wide margin. Still, you can take one of the Devil Fruits we brought along for the moment.”

“Wait, what!?” Kalifa and Kaku both yelled, barely keeping their voices down so they wouldn’t be heard out in the main barroom. “You brought along Devil fruits?”

“That’s right, these two idiots decided not to take them, and frankly, since we are assigned combat missions which sometimes occur out on the ocean, I see their point.” Pointing at the two small chests on the floor by his feet, Jabra cackled as everyone bar Rob groaned at his pun. Although even there, Rob’s pigeon had hidden his face behind its wing, which Jabra counted as a victory.

“But that should tell you how serious the World Government takes this. Spandam found them and was going to keep them until you lot finished your mission here, but they were released to us instead when Admiral Akainu changed our orders.”

“These orders come from the marines, not the World Government directly?” Rob inquired, somewhat surprised.

“Yeah. We’ll get to that in a bit,” Jabra answered, tapping a folder set on the table. “Go on, Fukurou. I want to know about Black Leg’s strength level.”

With a serious nod, Fukurou started up his analysis once more, although he did smirk slightly. He **hated** puns. “Kumadori and I are stronger than Kalifa, near the eight-hundreds. Jabra, you are at two-thousand, one hundred and eighty Doriki. Kaku beats you out by twenty Doriki at two-thousand two hundred. But the strongest by far is Rob Lucci at four thousand, a full thousand five hundred stronger than he was! Surprising, Chapapa!”

Jabra’s eyes widened as he forgot his interest in Black Leg. “What! How can he be that much stronger than me when he’s been doing nothing but carpentry!?”

“And fighting off pirates and learning carpentry from a man who thought nothing of working on a single project two weeks without any rest,” Kaku quipped.

It just means you are becoming weaker, dog,” Rob Lucci rolled his eyes.

“Don’t call me a dog, you bastard! I am a proud wolf!” Jabra growled, ready to launch himself forward, but he paused, remembering why they were all here. “And the pirate, Black Leg? If we’re going by the bounties, he is tied for third-most dangerous with Nico Robin.”

“...Chapapa,” Fukurou hesitated, then shrugged, pulling up that stored information. “He’s at around three thousand.” Everyone stared at him, shaking their heads in shock.

Only Jabra took this in stride, a thoughtful look on his face as he rubbed at his scar. “I think maybe call Kalifa could beat him.”

“Oh?” Kalifa drawled, quickly getting over her shock, cocking an eyebrow behind her glasses. “Why do you think that? Or is this some kind of strange sexual harassment?”

“If I sexually harass you, baby, you’ll know it,” Jabra taunted with a winking before dodging a kick from the blonde woman by leaning far back in his chair, balancing his chair on two legs and one hand on the floor as the kick sailed over him. When he pushed his chair back up with that same hand, though, the smile was gone from Jabra’s face, and he was holding the data packet that Admiral Akainu had given him, tossing it towards Rob Lucci.

“And as for why you might be able to beat him? Black Leg won’t take you seriously. If he attacked his own comrade when one of them attacked a female marine officer, then I doubt there’s any way he would fight you. He’s too ‘chivalrous. Something to think about. It’s all in there. Like Blueno’s message should have told you, the mission’s changed. The Straw Hats are our priority now.”

Rob Lucci caught it out of the air, flicking it open while Kalifa looked torn between smirking and scowling, uncertain if she was annoyed by the idea of someone not willing to fight her because she was a woman or happy to exploit it. “We saw three of their crew and Yard 1 today. Their captain wasn’t with them, but I could tell Pirate Hunter Zoro was... interesting.”

“Their captain frightened me when I met him on their ship,” Kaku said, admitting this without any shame whatsoever.

All of the others looked at him in shock, and the long-nosed agent shrugged his shoulders. “I might never have developed Doriki like Fukurou uses, but I’m the best of us when it comes to feeling out the dangers around us and understanding what might be happening.” Indeed, at one point, he and Fukurou had been told by their trainers that they were the only two CP9 members who might ever develop the Kenbunshoku technique. “Their captain is dangerous. He gave me a feeling of being near a monster, even more than you do, Rob.”

Rob Lucci’s normal frown deepened at that, but he kept reading the report as Kalifa demanded more information from Kaku. When Kaku couldn’t give more than that he had met

the man and Nico Robin on the ship, Jabra took over the discussion again, telling them all about what had happened.

“We had just finished a hunt and destroy mission against a Revolutionary Cell. We were due some downtime to train and everything...”

“Chapapa! And to let your girlfriend break up with you, Chapapa!” Fukurou interrupted.

“Shut up!” Jabra growled, ignoring Kaku’s snicker and Kalifa’s mocking look of sympathy. “**Anyway**, Spandam and I were called to Marineford to talk to Admiral Akainu in person. He tells us about the Straw Hats and how they must die. He then gave me this,” Jabra pulled out from his pocket something even more surprising than the two caskets holding the Devil Fruits. A golden Den Den Mushi.

“Wh... is that what I think it is?” Kaku gaped incredulously at the sight.

“Yep. Akainu has authorized us to call on the Buster Call if needed,” Jabra smirked, although he was looking a little concerned about it. “Yet after reading the report...”

“Is this all accurate,” Rob Lucci said, at last, cutting in before Jabra would be forced to explain everything within it verbally. “He knows at least five of the Rokushiki, the sixth is unconfirmed, but he says he knows it,” Rob said aloud for the other’s benefit, even as he handed the packet to Kalifa. “And Straw Hat also has at least some measure of Kenbunshoku and an extreme level of Busoshoku.”

That made Kalifa’s mouth drop open in shock even as she began to read the rest of the information. None of CP9 could use any Haki of any kind, though they were aware it existed.

“It’s true, a Marine captain, the same female who Black Leg leaped to defend in an earlier engagement, was aboard their ship for a while. They had to work together to defeat a logia user, who apparently was some kind of tyrant up in Skypiea,” Jabra shrugged. “No idea about that. But because of all of that, Straw Hat Luffy and his crew are our priorities now.”

Kaku shook his head shakily. “By the Five Elders! No wonder I felt like I was near a monster when I was around Straw Hat.” Someone who used Busoshoku as well as the Rokushiki? That was a monster of an entirely different size or scale than Kaku knew himself to be.

On the other hand, Rob Lucci scratched at his chin thoughtfully, something smoldering in his eyes: interest. A predatory desire to challenge himself against this powerful opponent.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Jabra growled, scowling at Rob Lucci. “Push down the Jaguar. This isn’t an opponent you can fight straight out.”

Grumbling, Rob Lucci reflected that the other man didn't have to deal with as many urges to direct conflict as he did as a Jaguar. His own model wolf was more coyote than alpha predator, a scavenger rather than lord of his domain. Regardless, the man was smart and Rob knew that he'd better heed his advice here.

Which brought up a question that had yet to be asked. "Who is in charge here? Between us all, I mean."

"...You're still in charge," Jabra admitted, chewing on the words as if he was chewing on glass and getting just as much pleasure from the deed. "But you better realize that the orders are to take this pirate crew above and beyond any other priority. Including the plans for Pluton or whatever it is you lot were sent here for originally. That is still part of our mission, but it's secondary right now."

"Fine," Rob grunted, knowing the man's words were accurate. He was a good infiltrator, but what Rob really was, was an assassin. He wasn't a strategist. That was an area where Jabra tended to do better. "What do you suggest we do?"

"I've actually been thinking about that all day. First, though, tell me about how much you know about those plans and where they might be hidden."

Kalifa spoke up then, handing the package to Kaku, her expression troubled. "We think that the plans have been handed over to Franky of the Franky Family. He may or may not be Cutty Flam, the second of Tom's apprentices. I could not overhear the conversation between Franky and Iceburg, but they definitely seemed to have the antagonistic but close relationship you would assume they would from stories about Tom's Workers. Where Franky has hidden, it has always been the issue, though."

"Heh, that makes it even better. Kumadori, you're sure you saw the Straw Hat's ship over by Franky House?"

"Yoyoi! I did indeed espy it there. I then saw the two groups of Straw Hats in the city heading out to join them. There even seemed a bit of a party atmosphere at that, Yoyoi!"

"And... how good is your female voice?" Jabra went on, thinking aloud. "I'm assuming that no matter how we try to disguise your's Kalifa, Iceburg would be able to recognize it."

While Kalifa acknowledged that was the case, Kumadori blinked, then thrust out his palm out theatrically, as he danced in place, before speaking in an admittedly passable female voice. "Yoyoi! I believe that I can play that role! Yoyoi!"

The problem from Jabra's perspective was that he knew for a fact that this pirate crew was too strong for CP9 to fight in any kind of open engagement. If the Pirates continued to practice such good discipline, having a Den Den Mushi on them like he had seen and always

going out in groups, then any direct conflict was going to spiral out of control quickly. And whatever Lucci's inner jaguar was telling him, Jabra knew that they had no chance against someone who could fight a logia type and win with Busoshoku.

The rest of the crew was easier, but they had only one card that could really fight Straw Hat, and that was the Buster Call. However, calling the Buster Call down to Water 7 was foolish in the extreme. Akainu might have thought it was a good idea, and Spandam, their loser of a boss, had seemed a little manic about having that power under his control. But Jabra was a strategist, and he knew that unless their ship was wrecked, the Straw Hats could simply leave, and the Buster Call would achieve nothing but fucking horrible press for the World Government.

But there were a few positives. One, with the ships assigned to the Buster Call so close, they would be here within forty minutes at most, and Jabra had also been given a regular communicator to contact them. For another... well, a Buster Call didn't actually need to destroy an entire island. It could be more directed than that. "Do we have a map of the island?"

Rob Lucci instantly pulled one out of his pocket, spreading it on the table. "What are you planning?"

"First things first. Kaku, take your Devil Fruit now. I'll warn you, Spandam didn't know anything about either, so what powers you'll get is anyone's guess. For tonight though, you just need to eat it and then start getting used to it. Kalifa, you'll need to wait for a bit."

Jabra fell silent, and Kaku wordlessly picked out a Devil Fruit, stepping away from the table to consume it. His grunt of "Disgusting!" made most of the other Devil Fruit users smirk, but Jabra was too busy looking at the docks where the larger pirate vessels were forced to drop anchor while on Water 7. It was a tiny inlet, with only one entrance, bar the rivers leading up into Water 7 proper. "Okay, this looks good, I think. We'll shoot for a specific kind of setup, but won't make many plans beyond that, just put ourselves in a position to respond as we can to events."

He looked over at Kalifa and Kumadori. "We want the populace here to turn against the straw hats, make them pariahs. Enough to make the locals want to either fight them or, at the very least, force the Straw Hats to leave," Jabra thought aloud. "And we want Nico Robin at the center of it. She's the weak link here."

"That's not a bad idea," Kaku enthused, recovering slightly from his Devil Fruit experience. "If the ships for the Buster Call are nearby, we can pin their ship in place, hammer them so badly it sinks. No matter how good they are at Geppo, and these notes say only three of them can use it for any length of time, they can be overcome at sea."

"Exactly. So, here's what we're going to do..."

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Introducing the rest of his crew to Franky when they arrived at Franky House was actually a lot easier than Luffy had expected. First was the group he had sent to negotiate with Iceburg and they were the hardest sells.

“Wait, you mean he really is...” Nami exclaimed, cutting herself off as she stared at Franky and Luffy arguing about something or other. She couldn't quite hear it over the sounds of merry-making from the rest of the Franky Family.

“Indeed he is. And for all his obvious strangeness, he does know his stuff,” Robin mused, gesturing down to a model of the Resolve that had been placed on the table in front of her. Once Franky had taken the bait, Luffy had turned it around on him, telling the man to prove his skills, only for Franky to make the model in front of her in less than a minute, before gesturing around at the Franky House itself, telling them that he had built the whole thing in less than a day.

Robin had looked around in seeming amusement at the time and had tartly reposted, “Is that supposed to be an advertisement for your service or a show that we were wrong to offer this task to you?”

“Actually, Robin, he’s got a point. The whole place might look like it’s falling down on the outside, but on the inside, it all looks darn well-made,” Luffy murmured, picking up the model, turning it this way and that. “And you remember that wall of guns. It was silly but well-made too.” He then held up the model, moving parts like it was one of the tiny, bottled variety of models. “And for someone who hasn’t yet been aboard the Resolve, or even close to it, the detail on this thing is kind of scary.”

Explaining this now to Nami caused the girl to shake her head with a sigh. “Well, I suppose if Luffy’s happy, I am too. I still think we should go for the proven shipwrights, but if he thinks that Franky can do the job, then why not.” She looked over at Franky, shaking her head. “Just, why a speedo and such a loud shirt? With those legs, and those arms and just... why?”

“I don’t know, but unless there is some deep-seated, psychological reason for the lack of pants, I will be most furious,” Makino murmured, also somewhat concerned by letting the living fashion disaster near their ship. *Although, come to think of it, won’t Resolve herself be a good way to see if this man has what it takes? Introducing her to him could be interesting...*

Zoro took one look at Zambai and a few of his followers, snorted, and said, “So, these weaklings have finally decided to not screw with us, huh?”

“Ey, don’t be that way, Swordsman-bro,” Zambai threw an arm around Zoro’s. “No hard feelings, right? Guy’s gotta do what they gotta do to survive. Come on, have a drink with us!”

“Drinks are one thing but knock it off with the swordsman-bro nonsense,” Zoro grumbled.

Shrugging her shoulders, Makino moved through the crowd, then leaped over the bar, looking at the drinks on hand. “You’ve got quite a collection here. I think I want a Cosmo. Nami, you want an orange martini?”

“Heck yes!” Nami whooped as she sat at the bar, grinning cheerily at the Franky Family. “Maybe we should look into getting a bar on the ship.”

“You and Zoro are the only real major drinkers, Luffy objected but then shrugged. “Still, it might not be a bad idea to put a drinks bar in the kitchen.”

By the time Sanji and his group arrived, a semi-party was well underway. Luffy labeled it a semi-party because the Franky Family seemed as if they reveled like this every day, so there was no sense of it being special.

As he entered the Franky House, Sanji was instantly won over by the two bikini-wearing girls, turning to Laki and shouting, “You see, that is true fashion!”

Laki gave him the finger, but Luffy supposed the cook might not have seen it given how quickly he turned around and belted towards the other end, as he twirled towards the two girls like a hurricane, kicking a few of the Franky Family members out of his way before he bowed grandly to them. “Dearest ladies, might this humble one ask, if you have any preferences? For I promise you, I will make you a meal fit for royalty to match your looks!”

“Eh, we don’t have much food on hand. It’s mostly bar stuff and drinks,” Kiev muttered, twitching. “And if you keep on flirting with Mozu and Kiwi, I might have to take your freaking hands off!”

“Hah, flirting is like breathing. If you wish to stop me from flirting, you must come at me with intent to end my life, for it is the same thing!” Sanji announced grandly, causing Luffy to guffaw and Zoro to roll his eyes. “And we actually brought back a lot of food already.”

“Speaking of that captain,” Chopper said from where he had followed Sanji forward, bearing the food supplies on his back. “How exactly are we splitting up the money anyway?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Nami grinned in delight as the orange martini was set in front of her and Makino began to cheerfully make drinks for several of the other family members. “sixty-percent of the money is mine, thirty percent goes to the ship, and the last ten can be divided among the rest of you.”

“No!” yelled several voices, causing Nami to laugh and wave her hands. “Joke, just a joke.”

“Anyway Chopper, sorry, it’s just never come up before. We’ll discuss how much of a cut from the booty we all get after the ship is repaired, not before. For now, Zoro can go with you tomorrow to purchase any books or anything else you want.” Luffy hummed thoughtfully. “In fact, you might want to take Nami too. She can help you figure out a style for your other form.”

Chopper frowned at that, then shrugged his shoulders as the last of the foodstuffs was removed from his back and carried into the tiny kitchen at the back of the bar. “Er, sure, but why?”

“Hmm... well, let’s just say that having a few people on the crew who can operate without anyone knowing that they’re Straw Hats might be a good idea occasionally,” Luffy replied, winking at Chopper, who got the point instantly.

A few seconds later, Franky and the rest of his gang were astonished as Sanji began to bring out food that looked and smelled so delicious a lot of them lost any semblance of self-control they might have had as they surged forward. This included Franky, who forgot about the argument about more cannons or larger he and Luffy had been having a moment before to rush to the bar and grab up a plate for himself. Seconds later, any remaining ill-feeling towards the Straw Hats for their one-sided beatdown(s) vanished as Franky added his voice to the tumult praising the food. “SUUUUppeer good!”

Moving toward the cook, Kiwi threw her arms around his shoulders, whispering in his ear. “Mmmm... that was so good, Cook-san. Are you sure we can’t convince you to join the Franky Family, waina?”

“It’s true, it’s true, depriving us of this food after giving us a taste, that’s almost a sin, waina!” Mozu added.

Franky wasn’t certain what to think about that as he looked at the cook melt between them like, amusingly, a bit of butter stuck between two hot plates. Then a little hoof tugged at his leg, and he looked down to see that the reindeer had somehow transformed into a.... “Tanuki?”

“GAH, I’m a reindeer, you bastard. You just saw me in my reindeer form a moment ago!” Chopper shouted, standing back and yelling the words up at Franky. “I swear to god, the next person who calls me a Tanuki is going to get a colonoscopy! With a freaking rebar!”

Shaking his head while Franky watched on in some shock, Chopper reverted to the still somewhat shy, awkward Zoan he normally was around strangers. “A, anyway, is it true that you, you’re a cyborg?”

Staring down at Chopper, Franky shook his head, slamming his hands together over his head, presenting the star tattoo. "I... do... not... know... what... you... are... talking... about... I... am... just... a... regular... human... sent... to... be... super..."

"EEHH, the robot voice!" Chopper exclaimed in delight, and Luffy laughed quietly, looking over at Zoro, who had sat beside him a moment ago. "Chopper seems to like him anyway."

"Meh, I suppose so. All that really matters is if Franky's strong enough and knows his business," The swordsman said, taking a drink from his mug. Unlike the rest of the people that Makino had served, he hadn't had any requests other than 'make it a double.' Zoro didn't even care what was being doubled. He just wanted more.

Hours later, Franky set his fifth glass of cola to the side, his eyes narrowed as he looked across to Luffy and the others of his crew. "There's one thing I don't get," Franky admitted, leaning back in his chair. "Why are you so firm about wanting to work on the ship yourselves and repair the ship in the first place? The use of your dials isn't enough to explain that."

He nodded towards Laki, who had sat down next to him, pulled out her gun and set it down as an example of what Dial Technology could create. The two of them had diverted the conversation for a time on to that topic, both of them eagerly picking one another's brains on various ideas on materials, what was and wasn't possible and so forth.

Franky was incredibly helpful in discussing the range and accuracy needed for a weapon system on a frigate. Fighting on a ship was extremely different from fighting on the ground, something that the Straw Hat pirates had basically skirted around up to this point. A gunner had to figure out the distance to the target, how the target was moving up and down thanks to the ocean and how the ocean was moving the ship below them. Making accurate shots at long range wasn't just about enlarging the concept of a sniper rifle. There was a lot more to it.

Luffy leaned back thoughtfully, looking at Franky. Glancing through the crowd of partying gangsters, he made eye contact with his crew, making a gesture with his hand towards his hip, and mouthing the name of their ship. All save Chopper understood this nonverbal communication. Laki, Makino, and Sanji nodded slightly, as did Robin from her position next to him when Luffy looked at her.

Zoro and Nami were harder to convince, being the most suspicious of his crew. He held their eyes, one eyebrow rising, and Zoro snorted, then shrugged as if to say, 'you're the captain, Captain,' and Nami finally sighed, nodding in agreement. But she stood up as well, moving to join Luffy and the others at the table, as did Makino, leaving behind the bar for a bit despite the calls for more drinks, her position taken by Mozu and Kiwi.

“Since you gave your word that you’re willing to work on our ship, I suppose we can share our last secret.” With that, Luffy hopped to his feet, gesturing his head out the door. “Come on. There’s another crewman you need to meet.”

“Antisocial, are they?” Franky said, looking around the party as the remaining Straw Hats continued to mingle with his gang. He’d noticed the little by-play but didn’t know what to make of it. And really, what kind of secret could be more important than the books about what was no doubt technology from the future they had gathered from the Rainbow Mist or the dials from Sky Island?

Soon enough, they were boarding the ship, with Luffy using Geppo to hop up the short distance, where he let down a ladder.

“Is that something anyone can learn?” Franky asked, watching the met people in the air. “It doesn’t look like a Devil Fruit thing.”

Makino nodded from behind him. “Yes, it’s difficult but quite useful. I just wish he wasn’t so enthusiastic about training me in it. Or training in general, really. You would not believe how long we spend training every day.”

Franky snorted at that, then follow the others up and into what would normally be the captain’s quarters on the ship. Franky was surprised to discover that it had been changed into a kitchen and a dining room.

“So, where’s your missing crewmember?” he demanded as he tensed. Franky was full of cola and ready to throw down if need be, and he still had a few tricks up his sleeve that he hadn’t used in his fight with Luffy before. But he didn’t think he’d fare any better against the guy this time despite that.

“Resolve? This is Franky. He’s going to be our builder. I know appearing in front of people not part of the crew is hard for you, but if he’s going to be working on your body, I think you two need to talk.” Luffy said as he propped up against one of the walls, looking around.

For a moment, there was silence, and Franky was just about such to ask what the heck was going on when Luffy spoke again, his voice firm. “I can make it an order Resolve.”

“I just can’t!” the shout came from everywhere at once, so loud Franky and the others all winced. Despite its volume, the voice sounded strained as it went on. “He’s not part of the crew. It’s not something I can train myself in. I said that before!”

Franky stared, watching all around them as he growled, “What the heck kind of tricky is this?”

“No trick. That is the spirit of our ship Resolve. Or Rassy as I call her,” Luffy laughed.

That seemed to work for a second, as spirit merged out of the wall next to Luffy, smacking him hard in the side of the head as the oddly bifurcated-looking girl shrieked in his ear. "Don't call me that!"

Then the spirit folded back into the wall with a grunt of something approaching pain, and Luffy instantly became apologetic. This didn't help him as Nami and Makino both glared at him and began to soothe the spirit, apologizing for Luffy being a moron, while he did much the same, taking his hat off and bowing from the waist towards the wall. "Sorry, Resolve, I honestly thought that it really was something you got could train, no matter what you were saying. I mean, if I had been told all my life that lifting a ton was impossible, then told to do it, I probably wouldn't have been able to either."

"That makes so much sense yet is so stupid at the same time. It's making my head hurt even worse," Resolve moaned.

Franky had said nothing during this moment in utter astonishment, his arms flopping at his side out of where he had crossed them, as he stared in awe at the walls around him. "OW, T, that is a, a Klabautermann! How... is this ship in that bad a way?! If it is, I don't know if even all can repair it to being super again. But I mean... looking around, it doesn't look like... what the heck is going on!?"

"I'm not that damaged! And if you're willing to put in the time, I think we can rebuild this ship, er, that is, me better and stronger," Resolve said, her earlier reluctance to speak disappearing.

"I," Franky stammered his head. "I, that's a super idea, but how is this possible. I've known of the Klabautermann legend for decades, but I've never met one. And all those legends say that a Klabautermann only appears when a ship is dying."

"I think those legends are only partly accurate on that. Think about it. A lot of times, a ship is just a ship until you have to really rely on it to keep you alive. The longer you do, the more the ship comes alive, especially when the ship itself is failing around you. So, you um..." Luffy paused, looking over at Robin. "What's the word where you give something a human image?"

"Anthropomorphize," she supplied.

"Right that, not even going to try to say that," Luffy muttered, causing Nami to laugh and Makino to snort.

Then he went on, and they were all smiling now. "But to us, the Resolve became home almost immediately. We started to put little touches around the place, starting with Nami's mikan trees, knocking down interior bulkheads to make room for single rooms and so forth. Since then, we've been in fights, against other pirates, against marines, against both at the

same time. We've seen adventures the likes of which none of us would have imagined before coming to the Grand Line, all of it aboard the *Resolve*. All of it in our new home. The same kind of emotions used to create a Klabautermann, only much faster than normal."

"You see?" Robin whispered, patting the wall. "This is why we cannot simply change to another ship. It would be like leaving a crewman and our home behind all in one."

Franky wiped a tear from his eyes and seemed almost ready to burst out into tears at the idea of their care for the ship bringing out a Klabautermann. But then he shot a fierce grin towards Luffy. "Well, I think that this just makes my decision to work on your ship all the better future, Pirate King."

With that, most of the crew gathered there and Franky returned to the party. Luffy stayed on the ship, though, mostly to apologize for causing *Resolve* pain. He did so by telling *Resolve* about some of the adventures *Resolve* hadn't been a part of, in particular the adventure in Alabasta.

By the time the rest of the crew broke off partying for the night, Luffy had moved on to doing some necessary interior design changes. He had removed the bed in Robin's room and set it flush up against his own. He then filled the area between them with another mattress cut to fit so that the two beds now almost looked like one larger bed. If one or the other of them rolled over the central area, at least they wouldn't fall through a crack or otherwise wake themselves up.

The addition that really made Robin smile, though, was in Robin's former room. There, Luffy had added several shelves. Like the preexisting ones, they were simple things, simply slats of wood hammered lengthwise into the bulkheads to either side. But the sentiment was there, and the message 'reserved for Robin's exclusive use' that had been hung on most of the new shelves made Robin smile when she saw it.

"That was rather sweet, my captain," Robin said as she turned to him, giving Luffy a kiss that went on for some time. Long enough to make Zoro, who had been with Makino, Robin and Nami, look a little uncomfortable, turn around and make his way up to the main deck. "I'll sleep in the crow's nest tonight."

Robin slowly pulled away, looking at her lips to slurp up a bit of saliva, watching in amusement as Luffy's eyes, which had dilated under her kiss, now flicked down and watched her tongue moving. Then Luffy was kissing her, his own tongue flicking demandingly against hers as he pushed her against the wall.

The archeologist could feel Luffy hardening against her as she started to slowly grind her core against his. But then Makino's voice intoned, "As nice as it is that the two of you are now open about your relationship and willing to take it to the next level, I would rather not hear or

otherwise witness such a thing. And I rather doubt that Sanji's soul would survive such an experience either."

Pouting, Robin pulled away, looking up at her captain thoughtfully. "Is it too late to order them all to find the room ashore? Or find one of her own?" she joked. At least, Luffy thought she was joking. She might not have been.

"Fraid so, Robin," Luffy sighed theatrically. "I'd rather stay with the ship anyway, at least until we know when Franky is going to start work on it."

"That was a surprise, that Franky was Cutty Flam. Still, you did an excellent job getting him to agree to work on our ship. And I think Resolve's revelation was the cherry on the top," Robin acknowledged as she headed towards Luffy's own compartment. It was just another crew quarters aboard the ship, walled off by Luffy a few days after they hit the Grand Line.

Despite being captain, he hadn't given himself any extra space or anything and looking inside, Robin was somewhat amused. "You and your first mate have quite a bit in common. Neither of you tend to appreciate having too many worldly possessions."

Luffy shrugged, closing the door behind him. "I'm not one to count coup or anything, and normally, I prefer to keep most of my personal belongings in my weapons space, so there's no need for a lot of stuff here. But be it ever so humble, it's ours for the night."

"And alas, without any soundproofing added as yet," Robin muttered, shaking her head.

Luffy smiled at her, a lazy, needy little smile. "Well... we could still try if you think you could keep the noises down..."

"Me!? I remember that you were bellowing like a gorilla in heat at one point," Robin mocked back before giggling. "But no. I have no desire to annoy the rest of our crew like that or deal with Sanji's histrionics on that score tomorrow."

Nodding, Luffy agreed with her, although he did feel slightly reluctant about it. Now that they had taken their relationship to the 'home run' level, he was eager to continue this new cardio training. Still, he knew Robin was right, and, after stripping off his shirt, he watched as Robin did the same to her dress, tossing it unceremoniously to the side.

The two of them crawled into bed from opposite sides, pulling up the covers. Soon, Robin was nestled into Luffy's chest, his arms around her as she slowly drifted off to sleep, feeling satisfied, wanted and safer than she had felt at any point in her entire life. Then a thought occurred to her. "Luffy, you should know that I have a tendency to toss and turn in my sleep. I also... don't have that much experience with sleeping with a lover like this. In fact, the time on Skypiea is almost all of my experience of actually sleeping with someone."

“Heh, that’s fine, Robin. I know Sleep-Fu.” Luffy replied.

“Sleep-Fu?” Robin parroted querulously.

“Heh, a story for another time. Just trust me, ya won’t hurt me or anything.”

Of course, getting to sleep with another person hugging you when you’re not exhausted or drunk is something you have to get used to. Getting to sleep was actually quite hard for both of them despite Luffy’s earlier words. He didn’t particularly toss and turn, but he did shift in place a lot, whereas, for Robin, the whole bed was her playing field. And both of them, they discovered, preferred to be the in charge of the cuddling, which caused a quiet, whispered argument in the dark of the room, and a ki-lit game of rock paper scissors, which ended in a make-out session before Robin submitted to being the little spoon for the night.

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Iceburg sighed, leaning back in his desk, taking a break from some paperwork he’d had to go over as Mayor of Water 7. Staring out the nearby window, he reflected that today had been interesting. The Straw Hats were not at all what he had expected from the news about them. The news had all called them ruthless killers who had ransacked the royal palace in Alabasta after trying to help Crocodile take over the country, only to be foiled by Commodore Smoker and his marines.

And they had the Devil Child with them, Nico Robin. She had been a particular bogeyman for Iceburg for a long while, the only one in the world who was able to discover the ancient weapons, of which Pluton was just one example of many. It was because of her that he had been tasked by Tom to keep the plans for Pluton safe. So that if the original was ever unearthed, another could possibly be built to counter it. *So, is her arrival here a sign that we need to start thinking in those lines, or is it really coincidental?* Iceburg thought, thinking of the plans he had entrusted to his annoying little brother from another mother/asshole of a fellow apprentice Cutty Flam. Or as he called himself these days, Franky.

Yet another part of him was wondering if those plans were needed at all. Because for all the bad news about them from their time in Alabasta, Makino and Nami had been, pleasant enough, if extremely hard bargainers. Even Zoro had not been the ruthless killer who was supposed to have slaughtered hundreds of bounty hunters before the falling out between Crocodile and Straw Hat caused him to fight and kill Daz Bones, a famous Paradise assassin.

Still, Nico Robin is with them. Never forget that, he thought, shaking his head. Perhaps it’s all an act. Perhaps they know where to find the original, and maybe know about the plans, and wish to destroy them before a rival can be built. The stories about how the Devil Child has made her way across the Grand Line paint for a very grim picture, and while no one knows her goals, she does seem to be an enemy of peace and the World Government. While I’m not fond of the latter, I am very fond of the former.

He looked up at a noise, turning around to stare at his door for a moment, then stood up, moving around the room frowning. "Could've sworn I heard something..." after a few moments, he moved back to his desk, tapping the quill out and restarting his battle with the paperwork. *A mayor's work is never done.* About six minutes later, all memory of the noise he'd heard was gone and he was fully engrossed in the work in front of him.

Then suddenly, an arm was around his neck, pulling him back hard and choking all noise from his throat. Another arm appeared in front of him. From the angle, Iceburg's suddenly fear-filled mind could tell it had sprouted from his desk. But from this angle, all he could see was the feminine hand holding a dagger right between his wide, frightened eyes.

"Where is it?" a female voice he had never heard before said in his ear, the arm around his throat loosening very slightly. "Where is it, the treasure of Tom's Workers?"

"I, I don't... what is going on, what is this?! What are you talking about!?" Iceburg attempted to bluff even as his heart began to pound in terror.

The dagger in front of his eyes pressed closer, the tip of it pressing into the bridge of his nose very slightly. Not enough to draw blood, but to make it plain that if Iceburg tried to jerk his head back to either direction, he'd probably lose an eyeball.

"Don't be foolish Iceburg. Where are they, the plans of Pluton," the voice spoke again, accompanied by the feel of hair swishing along his neck and shoulder. Normally that kind of thing could have been appealing, even sexy. Under these circumstances, it just added to the creeping fear crawling up his spine.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Iceburg answered once more, his mind racing. Hands from everywhere, a woman's voice. There was no doubt. This had to be Nico Robin.

"Wrong answer. We'll be back, and you will give us the right answer eventually, Iceburg. Or you will die by inches, and Water 7 with you."

With that, the dagger disappeared from Iceburg's gaze, only to reappear, stabbing deep into his side without any further warning.

As Kumadori stepped back on silent feet, Kalifa smiled thinly despite the frankly strange feeling of having her limbs half-in, half-out of Blueno's strange limbo zone. It had been years since her last assassination, but she could still remember how to stab someone without it being immediately fatal, and that had been practically textbook despite the odd viewpoint, above and to the side through another tiny door, she'd had to deal with.

As Iceburg was choked into unconsciousness by her other arm, stuck through another one of Blueno's doors, she let go of the dagger, leaving it in the wound to staunch the flow of blood. She stared at her boss for a moment, then smiled thinly as she held the hold around

Iceburg's throat for a few seconds, until his eyes fully rolled up in his head and his pulse reflected his unconscious state. "He's out."

Kumadori, whose female voice had quite disturbed her, instantly pulled his head back into the limbo zone. Knowing what was coming, Kalifa leaped out of a nearby door, landing in the office along with Blueno.

The doors scattered around Iceburg all closed and a single "Yoyoi!" escaped before they shut. Having had to go for so many lines, four, without letting loose his verbal tick Kumadori had to release it now.

The two assassins nodded to one another, and Blueno sighed. "How long should I give him, do you think?"

"No more than a few seconds. We don't want to remain here long, after all," Kalifa intoned.

After a few seconds, Blueno opened another door, then stepped forward, allowing Kalifa to step after him, both of them glaring Kumadori into silence. A second later, Blueno opened another door, allowing them to move through it to Kalifa's room. This was directly below Iceburg's room, and they had been hiding there for a few hours before striking.

The two other members of CP9 disappeared through yet another Devil Fruit-created door, which allowed them to hop over to a nearby rooftop outside the mansion. From there, they moved unseen through the darkness over Water 7, their part in this night's mission accomplished.

A moment after her teammates were gone, Kalifa was out of her room's regular door, frowning up at the ceiling.

Even at this time of night, there were workers around the place, shipwrights working on last-minute paperwork and a few dozen guards. After all, this was Galley-La Company's headquarters, and it was where they kept a lot of their liquid cash. There were also a lot of proprietary plans around the place, and in the early days of the company, before Iceburg had bought out every other shipwright on the island, a lot of its competitors tried to steal its secrets.

One of the guards turned to her in confusion, trying hard not to stare at the sleepwear that Kalifa had changed into after Blueno was gone. "What's wrong, Miss?"

"I, I heard a loud thump directly above my room." Kalifa frowned up at the ceiling. "It was loud enough to wake me up. Would you mind if we go and check what happened?"

The man shrugged, not having heard anything himself but willing to humor her. The two of them headed up to the next floor, where they found a few of the guards already looking around in confusion, acting almost like so many sheep. Without one of the foremen around, the shipwrights of Galley-La tended to be little more than a leaderless, if still semi-dangerous, rabble. "A few of us heard something too, but we didn't know where from."

Kalifa scowled, pointing towards Iceburg's room. "In there, I think."

"Er, it's really late. We didn't want to..."

"Stick your head in, for goodness' sake!" Kalifa said with a scowl. "Something doesn't feel right."

The look in her face, the concern coupled with the narrow-eyed glare convinced the guard, who opened the door and looked inside. He was prepared to tell her that it was nothing, but his eyes widened in shocked horror, and he banged the door open, rushing forward while shouting over his shoulder, "Someone get a doctor!"

OOOOOO

Early the next morning, Luffy woke up frowning slightly as he found that somehow, Robin had moved from being in his arms to lying on his other side, putting herself as the big spoon for a moment. It wasn't so much that it wasn't fun having her chest pressed into his back could never be that. It just wasn't as comfortable as having Robin in his arms.

However, that wasn't what had woken him up. Something had poked Luffy in the forehead, getting through his Sleep-fu to do so. Blearily Luffy looked to the side of the bed and saw Resolve standing there, pointing out the nearby circular porthole, nearly hiding from the shaft of light coming through it.

Frowning, Luffy looked in that direction in time to see Franky dive down into the sea.

What's he up to? Luffy wondered. *Looking at the damage from underneath, maybe?*

Getting out of Robin's grip proved somewhat easy, the woman sleeping deeply, a small, warm smile on her face.

By the time that Franky came up for air, Luffy was on deck, peering out over the side at him. "Yo, Franky. You discover anything new down there?"

"I was checking on Kaku's evaluation of your ship. Get that cook of yours to start breakfast. We have things to talk about," Franky said seriously.

Luffy nodded, and a few moments later, as they were all sitting together on the deck, eating another meal together, with Robin nearby sipping from a cup of coffee and clinging to it as if it were her precious. Nami sat with Laki and Robin on either side of her, smiling and happy as she dug into her meal, shocking both Mozu and Kiwi as they had seen how much ale she had put away the night before.

As they all ate, Franky began. "Okay, here's the deal. You keep my identity to yourselves, and I'll help build your ship. You're right, I've always wanted to build a ship equal to the Jackson, part of why my former master was my idol was the fact that he had built a ship that could not only take on whatever the world could throw at it but which had literally sailed every ocean in the world and brought its crew back to tell the tale."

"But I meant what I said last night. I can't leave here. So you'll need to look elsewhere for a carpenter."

Luffy nodded at that, understanding where the guy was coming from. Putting aside his dream for his friends was somewhat respectable in his eyes.

"But I will work on your ship, and because of that, there's something you need to know. Kaku was right. Your keel is somewhat damaged. It was well repaired, but a keel once damaged is never the same. Yet if we're going to repair something, I figure we should probably only repair it once. And there is, well, there's a secret to the Oro Jackson and its ability to survive the New World and the journey to Raftel that not many people know. And that is the fact that the wood which made its hull was special way before it became part of the Pirate King's ships."

Leaning back in his chair, Franky continued, seeming to change the subject for a second. "Once, centuries ago, an endless war raged on an island. People died, and the island was destroyed by a rain of bullets and left in ruins. However, the people kept coming back to rebuild the nation near a giant tree, the only one that remained intact, and that was Adam. Its timber is said to be as strong as steel, but it can be worked like wood with the right materials and skill."

He breathed in deeply, looking around the Resolve for a moment. "My underworld contacts have told me that there is a shipment of wood to build an entire galleon, not just a little frigate, but an entire galleon, that is going to be auctioned off soon. And we can get there, to that auction, using Puffing Tom. The only problem is, it's going to be immensely expensive. A hundred million minimum, maybe twice that."

Nami grimaced. "What about steel? Many of the books from rainbow Mist mentioned ships made out of steel, as well as something called coppering."

"I've made a few ships out of steel in the past," Franky said with a nod. "They're strong and tough, but the problem is, they're hard to repair, insanely expensive, and they also rust like nobody's business in the Grand Line, especially in the New World."

Blinking, Luffy looked confused at that, but Franky waved him to silence. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. Just know that if it isn't coated with Seastone, steel will rust or simply get eaten away by something in the New World just as fast as a wooden vessel, and sometimes even faster."

Luffy wondered how the hell that possible, but then inquired, "What about coppering then? And I doubt that steel was ever an option, Nami. Not if we wanted to keep enough of Resolve around to transfer over."

"Expensive, but doable. Adding it to Adam wood is doable, for certain. Like I said, as tough as it is against impacts, if you know how to weaken it, you can work Adam wood like any other type. And I'm going to be the one building your ship, aren't I?" Franky crossed his massive forearms and glaring halfheartedly at Luffy. "You kick in my door. You bring out my oldest dream! Don't now turn around and say you're not going to agree with what I'm telling you here."

"You have a point said. My sales pitch was a little aggressive, I suppose."

Franky laughed as the rest of the crew, but then Luffy nodded. "Alright, Franky, you sold me. But before that, we need to talk ship design."

Nodding, Franky looked around at the rest of the crew. "Leaving aside weapons for now, Laki and I will hammer out some idea there. Do you lot have any requests?"

Needless to say, this went on for some time, with Luffy simply adding his own voice to the tumult occasionally.

Eventually, Franky had everything they needed, and the crew had argued one another down from certain impossibilities. This ranged from Zoro, who had wanted a set of weights that could be modified to be heavier and heavier as we go along, to Nami's desire to have a jewel-encrusted bed stand or a fully automated dishwasher that Sanji requested. "You're a cyborg right, something like that should be easy for you!"

Really, Chopper's desires for a clinic And Laki's for her own area to tinker in was really small-change in comparison to whatever dreams of madness the others had.

When Franky asked Luffy what he wanted, Luffy answered, "Sound dampening around my quarters as blandly as he could, which caused his crew, sans Sanji and Chopper, to laugh, as Franky just furrowed his brows in confusion.

"I don't need more space than the rest of the crew," Robin coughed delicately, giving him a look, and Luffy quickly amended. "We don't need space more than two of the other crew. However, the sound dampening in the wall is a must."

"I would've thought a captain would want to hear whatever's going on his ship, but I suppose with resolve being alive and all, that makes sense," Franky muttered, staring down the ship, then all around him. "By the way, how is that supposed to work? I mean, will Resolve the spirit feel it once we start taking the ship apart, or not? And how much of the original ship needs to stay to make it still the same ship? I gotta say, working with a Klabautermann sounded a lot better last night than it does now that I'm thinking about, well, about operating on a living ship."

Resolve's voice came from all around, little creature spirit still not willing to appear before non-crewmembers even after Luffy convinced her to speak up last night. "Actually, I shouldn't feel anything so long as we are careful. I can sort of suck my spirit out from an area while it's getting worked on. It takes a lot out of me, and the bigger the area, the more difficult it is, but I can do it. And then, when new bits are added, my spirit will spread out to them instantly."

"That's a load off my back, I'll admit," Franky breathed a sigh of relief, then looked at Luffy quizzically. "But that's all you wanted? I would've thought you'd have piled in with the super but impossible requests like Zoro and Nami."

"I already told you my supper request," Luffy taunted, grinning as he leaned back, smacking his head twice against the mainmast behind him. "I want the baddest ship, most dangerous ship afloat."

Franky smirked as Resolve cackled, and it was nowhere near as humorous a sound as it should've been. More like the cackle of a mad god coming from every direction around them.

However, their moment of humor was short-lived as Zambai raced up to the side of the ship. "Aniki! There's trouble, big trouble coming in from Water 7!" He held a local newspaper aloft, and what was on it did not please Luffy at all.

"Extra extra, read all about it, Mayor Iceburg attacked! Unknown assailants stab Mayor Iceburg leaves no trace behind. Mary Iceburg comatose!"

The article was basically all headline with no substance to it, and Franky scowled, shaking his head. "They don't seem to know anything."

"It does seem that way," Luffy agreed, frowning. "This isn't good."

"What do you mean?" Chopper inquired, also frowning but for an entirely different reason than his captain. "Um, do you think I should offer my services to help this Iceburg guy?"

"I'd wager Iceberg's got his own doctors, Chopper. Unless we hear about his condition worsening, I'd hold off on that. As for why I'm worried, we just arrived here, and this happens? With our luck?" Luffy shook his head. "Yeah, that's not a coincidence."

Zoro and Nami broke both grunted in agreement, followed by Makino and Sanji as they grasped what Luffy was implying. Laki and Chopper still looked confused, and Franky just looked a bit conflicted. "Come on, guys, it's obvious. We arrive in Alabasta just as Croc is going to launch his takeover. We arrive in Skypiea just as Enel is ready to go from megalomaniac to mass murderer? And now this? Please. I don't know if this is aimed at us yet, but I can wager eventually whatever's going on will drag us in. Damn it."

"So what's the plan? Should we just leave?" Robin inquired. She could see a pattern appearing, but what to do about this latest iteration was the question.

Luffy frowned a little, looking over at Robin. A part of him wanted to ask her to start using her powers to scour the whole island to see if they could discover what was going on. She had at one point told him she could use her powers like that, although it would take a lot out of her and would need to be done in sections with an area this big. But another part of him was worried about how that could be seen by locals who were already on edge. *And any damage done to her limbs comes back to her, however limited. And that isn't the only way they can prepare for trouble.*

"Franky, how long will it take for you to buy the wood you want and get back here?"

"A full day at the least, depending on when the auction's going to actually happen," Franky answered instantly. "My contact didn't say. But the trips pretty darn long, the island we're going to is the most distant that Puffing Tom connects to, so, maybe as much as two days."

"All right. Franky, you can buy the wood, but I want Nami and Makino to go with you. And..." he frowned, looking at the rest of his crew. "Sanji," he said, at last, admitting the obvious. "You go with them."

The cook was happy with that, of course, dancing around excitedly. "Nice assignment, captain!"

Franky, too had no issue with this. "OW! It's super nice to have another pair of lovely ladies along with Mozu and Kiwi!" he said, posing with his hands thrust out to one side, which made Sanji ecstatic. Four ladies for the price of two!

But as happy as he knew that would make Sanji, Luffy had his own reasons for that. For one thing, given Sanji's picture, he could more easily blend in, just like Makino and Nami could change her hair or clothing to do the same. That also put one of his strongest fighters with Franky just in case they ran into trouble. Luffy trusted Franky, but they were dealing with an underworld auction, after all.

"I'm presuming you still want to buy some books, Chopper? And Robin, I know you're always in the mood for more books too."

Both nodded, although Chopper was much more hesitant about it. Zoro, you go with Robin and Chopper. Keep your eyes peeled and be back here as fast as you can. Laki, you stay here with me on the ship for now. I want to guard Resolve just in case. For now, we just need to wait until Iceburg wakes up and we can learn some more information.”

He looked over at Franky, one eyebrow rising. “I don’t suppose that you could contact Iceburg somehow, ask him what the hell happened?”

Franky looked around reflexively, then shook his head. “It’s going to take me a while to get used to the fact that you lot know my secret. And no, I can’t. Part of my anonymity was made by never contacting him. I only did so once when I first assumed this identity. That was years ago.” The shipwright-cum-gang lord stood up. “Regardless, we should be going if we want to catch the right train.”

OOOOOO

Hearing the cries of the newsies below, Jabra smirked. Leaning back in his chair in the casino, he stared out the window at the town below. *Heh, that seems to have worked about as well as it could have.*

Moments later, though, Nero arrived from where he and Fukurou had been assigned to keep a distant watch on the Resolve. Hearing his report, Jabra frowned for a moment. “Three of them, huh. Along with Franky?”

Nero nodded, and Jabra scowled. “All right. Cutty Flam is still one of our targets, considering he might know where the plans Rob and his group were supposed to find. Nero, Blueno and Kumadori go after them. Capture Franky, then kill the others. Blueno’s in charge.”

This wasn’t a random pairing. Jabra wanted all three of their bigger hitters to remain here to face the Pirate Hunter, even though Kaku would still be somewhat hampered by his new Zoan abilities, something that Jabra still had trouble not laughing about. On the other side of the ledger, against Black Leg, Blueno’s Door Door abilities should be very effective. Whereas Kumadori could back up Blueno, fight the other two female pirates, with Nero providing cover or pinning down Franky. *The only other one I might’ve sent was Kalifa, considering it’s Black Leg. But her cover is such that she can’t get away on the fly and her new powers could be useful against the remaining Straw Hats too.*

Nodding, Nero exited, meeting up with the others at the bar, which was ‘closed for repairs.’ Soon, they were boarding the same ship as Franky and the Straw Hats with him, unnoticed by any of their targets.

OOOOOO

Chopper, Robin and Zoro were soon back, with Chopper shaking his head and saying the stuck stores turned us away. "They didn't attack us, but they're refusing to do business with us."

"Suspicion falling on the pirates is normal," Zoro shrugged laconically, but his hand was still laying on top of his hilts. "If we wanted to be universally loved, we wouldn't be pirates."

"True that," Luffy muttered, scowling as he tapped his fingers down on the table.

Zoro grunted himself, sitting down and leaning back, staring back out towards Water Seven. "You know, yesterday, this place seemed a little too welcoming, a little too good to be true. Now I'm really annoyed that my thoughts on that score have been proven so right."

"The joys of being a pessimist, occasionally you really do hit the bull's-eye," Luffy laughed, then shook his head. "Still, let's get in some training. We can't do anything else right now."

OOOOOO

The Straw Hats stayed on the Resolve for the rest of the morning. Then in the afternoon, Iceburg awoke and began to tell his story to the gathered foremen of Galley-La Company. Soon, the news that Nico Robin was being blamed for the attack on Iceburg made it out to the Straw Hat crew, thanks mainly to the Franky family. "Although people seem to know we're friends with you now too, and a lot of the townsfolk looked like they might attack us the next time we're in town," Zachary said, scowling. "But the stories the same everywhere,"

"So the papers are blaming Robin?" Luffy scoffed. "Typical."

"Indeed," Robin sighed, leaning back. "This isn't the first time I've been blamed for some random event, or even a long-planned out assault just because of my mere presence. The Devil Child makes for an easy target, after all. And... it must be said I have actually done similar things."

Luffy grumbled at that, crossing his arms and glowering. "Doesn't mean we have to like it. Especially since there's no way you could have been involved with it this time. And it doesn't mean that we need to take it lying down."

"What do you mean?" Laki questioned.

"I mean, that if Iceburg thinks it's you, maybe I should go talk to them in person."

Robin chuckled at that but was still looking worried about the idea of her name being used to bring hate down on the Straw Hats, raising concerns only recently buried.

Then Luffy hugged her from behind, his arms around her stomach. The two of them were still leery about PDA, but since Sanji wasn't there, Luffy thought it was a good idea to show his support. "Hey, don't worry about it. Like Zoro said earlier. We're pirates, Robin. Being hated is old hat to us. You might be an easy target, but that doesn't mean anything to the crew or me. You're still one of us and one of us you'll remain."

"Thank you, Captain," Robin murmured, kissing his cheek before Luffy reluctantly let her go, moving to the side of the ship. He had a job to do.

The atmosphere in the town as Luffy moved over the rooftops was tense. Not only were there more shipwrights out and about today, but a lot of the stores he passed by had been damaged in some fashion. The shipwrights were rounding up pirates off the other ships in port, with little fights breaking out here and there. Indeed, there seemed to have been at least four knockdowns, drag-out fights in the lower segment of the city.

Despite that, and a few watchmen scattered about the rooftops, Luffy easily made his way deeper and perforce, higher into Water 7. A few times, he was forced to drop down into an alleyway or resort to the Umi-Sen-Ken. While he would rather not use the Quiet Thief technique often, Luffy had decided that he needed to try and not start a fight this time. *Not until I get to the mayor's place anyway. Then I might want to make a bit of a point.*

While he had been careful not to show it, Luffy had been extremely annoyed, perhaps even vexed, at the idea of someone blaming Robin for the attack on Iceburg. The fact Iceburg and everyone else had been so quick to agree that it had to be her made it even more annoying. Luffy knew that Robin could do such a thing, but there was a difference between being capable and being willing to do something. He was more than willing to take out a bit of aggression on the local morons if given the opportunity.

Sticking to the houses which overlooked the back alleys for a time, Luffy saw more evidence of fighting, as well as a few of the Franky family members out and about. They moved in packs of three for the most part, and regardless of what they were doing, all of them being given the stink eye by the locals. It was evident the locals' fear of causing trouble with the powerful gangster family had disappeared under their anger at the Franky Family possibly being allied to Luffy's crew.

Luffy left them to it, seeing as it wasn't his job to look after them. Soon he was nearing the mayor's office near the center of the town.

There, at last, he was spotted as he climbed up the outer wall of the mansion. Several of the foremen Zoro had described to Luffy were stationed there, and one of them, Paulie judging by the description he had been given, raised the alarm before Luffy could do anything about it. "What the?! Straw Hat, it's Straw Hat Luffy! He might be trying to finish the job The Devil Child started last night. "Get him!"

Luffy leaped down, looking at the gathered shipwrights as they moved to surround him, and decided to make one try at diplomacy before making an example of them all. "I just want to talk to your boss, that's all."

"Like we're supposed to believe you!" roared Tilestone, as he launched an overhead strike from a bung hammer as large as he was, whirling around and hurling it towards Luffy. Luffy leaped up over the blow, dodging both it and several ropes launched his way by Paulie, landing as Tilestone halted his attack, bringing the hammer back up trying to shake Luffy off the end of it.

He then tapped it as he leaped away, kicking out hard at an incoming Rob Lucci, his pigeon flying away to a nearby tree as Rob closed. The kick was blocked, but the impetus still smashed Robbie out of the air where he landed, using one hand to grab at the ground and stop himself from crashing into it face first.

The impact of Luffy's fingers on the mallet shattered the mallet's head. Then Luffy was in among Kaku and the double-dagger wielding Lulu, dodging and poking each of them in turn. His fingers hurled both of them away easily, so hard that Kaku wondered briefly if this was a sign of Luffy's mastery of Shigan. But after a few seconds, he decided it wasn't. It was simply a sign of Luffy's basic strength. The attack didn't penetrate, only strike.

Consigned as he was to fight with an equal level of strength to his fellows, Rob still wasn't about to let Luffy have it all his own way. Flipping himself upright, he closed quickly, But Luffy was waiting for him. The disguised CP9 member lashed out fast enough to flatten any of the other foremen, even Kaku, but Luffy still dodged. Instead, Robb found his forearm snared in one of Paulie's ropes, something he had become used to over the years and how often they fought.

"Gah, sorry Lucci I..." That was as far as Paulie could get before a kick lash out into his face, causing him to stumble. Another dodge later, and the rope-user found himself pulled directly into Rob as Luffy dodged backward, grabbing and pulling at the rope in the same movement. A quick kick to the stomach of Rob sent him one way, while a chop to the neck laid out Paulie before Luffy was once more dodging attacks from Lulu then Tilestone. But they too were quickly overcome, sent crashing into one another before Luffy used their heads as a springboard to launch himself up and towards the mansion.

Behind him, from where he had been kicked up into the foliage of a tree, Rob watched through narrowed angry eyes, as the pirate landed on the windowsill of the third-story window. Not even the sight of his pigeon landed on his shoulder allowed Rob Lucci to ignore the feeling of fury at being so easily cast aside. *Once more, he ached to show his true strength to this pirate bastard but reined it in. Straw Hat will soon get his if Jabra's plan works. And this attack just adds fuel to the next phase, after all.*

It took Luffy a few tries leaping from one window to another to find the room where Iceburg was in, by which time the mayor had been woken up by the commotion outside. He was sitting up in a large bed, with a blonde woman in glasses standing by his bed. *That's got to be Kalifa. Huh, she really does look just like a secretary in an AV, doesn't she?*

A light tap on the window announced his presence, but before Luffy could smash in the window, Kalifa did it for him, launching herself into a kick. But even as her foot connected with the glass, shattering it, Luffy had fallen back over the edge of the windowsill, holding on with his fingers. *After all, Luffy thought, no need to use Geppo here.* He was still very much of the opinion that the less his abilities and skills of his crew were known, the better off they all were.

Kalifa's leg smashed through the glass, the spectacled woman launching several dozen kicks in an instant. But as she tried to pull her leg back, Luffy's hand shot up, grabbing her ankle in a grip of steel. An instant later, Kalifa found herself flung out the window with a cry of "Kyaah!"

"Eh, that was kind of cute," Luffy muttered, then, with his remaining hand on the sill, he flipped himself upwards and through the broken window. Turning to the bed, Luffy paused, seeing Iceburg had pulled out a gun from under his pillow. A gun he was not pointing at Luffy.

"Is this about me tossing the blonde? Don't worry, I aimed for the pile 'o foremen I left down there." Snickering slightly at his own joke Luffy shook his head, pushing his hat off his head to dangle around his neck as he held up his hands. "I come in peace," he quipped and then sighed as Iceburg simply glared at him. "Tough crowd."

"First, you try to kill me, and now you come here to try to joke about it after beating up my guards!! You expect me to let you..."

"If I wanted to kill you," Luffy said, suddenly holding the gun, having covered the distance so fast that Iceburg hadn't even seen him move. He squawked as the gun was gently pulled out of his hand, then turned into a ball of mangled wood and iron in Luffy's hand before he dropped it. "You and your foremen couldn't stop me. That's sort of why I just played with them for a bit but didn't pile up the dead bodies. I'm not here for that. I'm just here to discover what happened to you."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn't! It just makes me question your sanity for coming here so brazenly when we both know the Devil Child attacked me last night! All that remains to be seen is if you merely transported the assassin or if you are hiding something else," Iceburg growled. He saw Luffy's point, but that didn't change facts.

"Yeah, you and everyone is saying you were attacked by Nico Robin. But it ain't true. Nico Robin was with me all of last night," Luffy declared bluntly. "In my bed, with my arms around her. Trust me, there's no way she could get out of bed for a bout of light murdering without me knowing."

At that point, the door to Iceburg's bedroom burst open, but before Lulu and Paulie could enter, Luffy was in their faces, punches blasting them back out and into the crowd of shipwrights behind them. All of the shipwrights went down liking bowling pins.

Shutting the slightly broken door to the groaning noises of the men beyond, Luffy turned back to Iceburg as if he hadn't been interrupted. "No, something else is happening here. Either some other group is trying to frame my crew, or they're just making certain you and us can't work together."

"And that is supposed to be enough to convince me, your word and watching you beat up more of my workers?" Iceburg scoffed. "You're pirates! You lie, cheat, steal, murder! And even if true, you're her lover, so of course, you'd be willing to cover for the Devil Child."

"I really don't like that term. I've been nice so far, but if you keep using that, nice is going to go out the window after Blondey," Luffy growled.

Iceburg blanched, and when he spoke next followed that advice, even if his tone and words were still antagonistic. "My question is, why would you or Nico Robin want me dead. What does she know?"

"As far as I know, quite a lot, but nothing to do with you," Luffy answered. "Other than ancient history, she really doesn't have any other interest, and Water 7 doesn't have any of that. I repeat, someone else did this. I just have no idea who."

Iceburg scowled, but the certainty in Luffy's voice made him rethink what he was going to say. Instead, he came up with an idea. "Then bring Nico Robin here. Let me question her myself. I heard a woman's voice, one I've never heard before. I saw hands appear where they should never have been able to, and that is known to be Nico Robin's powers, the powers that gave her a bounty at such a young age. If that's not Nico Robin, who is it? Bring Nico Robin here, let me talk to her, let me see if her voice is the one I heard. Otherwise, all your words are worth nothing."

Narrowing his eyes, Luffy wondered on that, then posed one of the many questions that was bothering him right now. "Did you see any Sakura petals?"

"What?" Iceburg blinked at the non-sequitur.

"Whenever Robin uses her powers, the limbs appear in a tiny cloud of Sakura petals. Don't ask me why. And there are other ways to make arms appear out of nowhere. Unless you tell me you saw those petals, I'm not going to believe Robin was the person who attacked you," Luffy declared crossing his arms in emphasis.

Shaken somewhat by Luffy's logical-sounding argument as well as his certainty in what he was saying, Iceburg's scowl shifted into one of confusion. He hadn't seen the arms appear,

after all, nor had he noticed any flower petals. I even only really saw one arm and felt the other... but even so, the angle of that knife holder, and how quickly it disappeared... "I, again, am I supposed to just take your word? Again, you're pirates! No matter how logical you sound, that's not going to change. No, letting me meet with Nico Robin and see her powers in action are the only way you can exonerate your crew's name."

Now it was Luffy's turn to scowl while a commotion started up beyond Iceburg's bedroom, more foremen and shipwrights arriving, or the men Luffy had dumped outside regaining their feet, he wasn't certain. "All right, but she won't be alone."

Iceburg made to open his mouth, but Luffy pointed at him sternly. "That's non-negotiable. You might've been the target of this assassination, or this could be some kind of smear campaign like I said. Regardless, none of my crew are going to be moving around on their own. In return, you need to call off your dogs. I heard that the townsfolk were getting up the courage to try and run us out of town. I don't want that to happen."

"Fine. although, if you really want to lessen hostilities, you might need to make a show of some kind of concession yourself."

Luffy crossed his arms. "Okay, what do you mean?"

"Leave Franky house. Franky and his gang are known troublemakers, and a large portion of the town have been hankering to go after them for a while. Your association with them is suspicious." *On many levels*, Iceburg added mentally. He had been horrified to learn this morning that the Straw Hats seemed to have come to some agreement with the Franky Family, judging by where their ship had dropped anchor, anyway.

Luffy scratched at his ponytail thoughtfully. "Fine. I'll move the ship back to where we were originally. And I'll send my first mate, Nico Robin and our Doctor up to speak to you this evening. Do we have an understanding?"

"Yes. Now get out," Iceburg said, slowly dropping back to his pillow.

Nodding and with a final jaunty wave, Luffy was out the window flying just over the head of Kalifa, who nearly squeaked as his knees missed her forehead by a bare centimeter. "Whoops, sorry, Blondey!" Luffy laughed before landing on the lawn beyond, racing away.

OOOOOO

Glaring out after the pirate, Kalifa took a moment to think deadly thoughts in his direction before she turned away, hopping off the windowsill and moving towards Iceburg's bed. "Iceburg-san, are you alright!?"

"I am. It seems that if Nico Robin was behind my assault, the Straw Hats want us to believe they didn't have anything to do with it. Still, this opens up some possibilities anyway," Iceburg paused as Paulie lead the other foremen into the room, minus Kaku, an absence that Iceburg, even in his rapidly weakening state, noticed. "Where's Kaku?"

"Hit his head against a rock when Tilestone was smashed into him," Paulie said, looking over his boss anxiously. "He looked like he's got a concussion. I ordered him to head home. But enough of the square nose, are you alright, boss?"

Rob Lucci carefully did not smile. After a single night spent exercising it, Kaku had yet to master his new Devil Fruit powers. This would let him get in a few more before they were needed.

"I'm fine, I think." Iceburg explained his brief conversation with Straw Hat, shaking his head. "Rob, Paulie, you'll be in charge of setting up that meeting. Kalifa, I want you to take some of the boys. Spread the word throughout town they are **not** to attack the Straw Hats. I don't want a bloodbath on our hands."

Kalifa nodded slowly at Iceburg's words, while inwardly, she was elated that this was turning out the way one of Jabra's scenarios called for. "I will relay those commands, although the doctor says that you still shouldn't be out of bed. Your stab wound was apparently quite serious."

"I'll be delighted to stay in bed if you could handle that for me. Thank you, Kalifa. But could you send up some food and maybe come back right away, so I have someone to talk to?" Iceburg wheedled.

"Iceburg-san, that's sexual harassment," Kalifa said, pushing her glasses up her nose again.

"I've been stabbed, and I still can't get away with even a mild flirt?" Iceburg cried out, making three of the five people in the room laugh. The last two both kept their thoughts to themselves, well pleased with how this was going.

Now, if only the marines are ready to act quickly, we might be able to achieve both our original objectives and the destruction of the Straw Hat crew as we were ordered to, Rob Lucci thought. For Absolute Justice, I will see it done. No matter what.

OOOOOO

Ten minutes after leaving Iceburg, Luffy was back with his crew, explaining the about the deal Luffy had made, Robin frowned in annoyance but agreed that Luffy had done all he could to diffuse things. "I still think that this is someone else trying to blame me obviously, but

their end goal eludes me. And I would rather like the chance to clear my name, something I have never been in a position to do before."

"To me, it feels as if we're caught up in something, some things going on here, that's completely separate from us," Zoro disagreed.

"Regardless, if we can stop the locals from launching some kind of attack on us, we should do it. We'll take the Resolve back to the port, as I told Iceburg I would. And when it comes time for you all to leave, Laki will stay here with me, while Zoro and Chopper will go with you, Robin."

"Why don't you come with me, and the others stay here?" Robin asked.

"Because this way we're toning things down again. And it's not like I couldn't arrive there quickly if you all need me to," Luffy answered.

Robin nodded thoughtfully at that, and the meeting broke up, with Robin going to get a hat and sunglasses. Chopper transformed back into reindeer mode while Zoro waited impatiently.

Luffy looked after them, frowning. "I know I should trust my crew to look after themselves, and I do. But despite that, why do I think that some shit is going to go down?"

"Because you are a horribly good judge of your own luck?" Resolve guessed, the spirit appearing beside him, her words causing Zoro to laugh. "Your orders, Captain?"

"Yeah, probably. Still, let's get the ship moving out into the open ocean and back to the dock we were at before," Luffy ordered, and he, Resolve, Zoro and Laki set to.

End Chapter

Prepare for a BIG time combat chapter if this wins the poll again folks.